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SHANGHAI STAKES, another NILA story

SCARLET ADVENTURESS

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The
Sorceress
of
Vincennes

by
Edw. Green

The
Messalina
of Mexico

by
Hilda Ralston

SATAN'S
Step-Daughter

by
Thelma Ellis



OCTOBER, 1935

SCARLET ADVENTURESS

25 CENTS

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SEVEN COMPLETE STORIES

SCARLET ADVENTURESS

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SCARLET ADVENTURESS Magazine published once a month by Associated Authors. David Bruce Scarlet, Editor. Office of publication, Editorial and Executive Offices, Hoola Long Island, New York. Yearly subscription, \$2.50. Single copies 10 cents. Application for this pending at U. S. Patent Office, Washington, D. C. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Harper Lane, 155 E. 40th St., New York City.

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by

BEECH ALLEN

*Another Nila story--
of intrigue and love
and tragedy--in China*

CHAPTER I

A Gun and a Garter

THERE was mystery enough about her, without adding the subtle allure of perfume. Yet the exotic creature in the black velvet gown stood for a long, speculative moment before the array of crystal containers on her dressing table. A slight frown puckered her creamy brow as she sought a scent as languorous—as inscrutable as herself.

Beyond the open porthole, a star spangled sky brooded over the dark waters of the China Sea. A sultry breeze stole into the cabin. It toyed with a dusky curl at the nape of her neck, wafted like incense to her delicate nostrils. She sniffed at it and her eyes half closed; her carmined lips parted in a faint smile. Then, with the inspiration that the Fates had sent her, she reached for a crystal flacon.

A touch of the precious fluid to dark curls, to the pink lobes of tiny, half-hidden ears, to the expanse of ivory breast revealed by her daringly cut gown. . . .

And Nila Rand was ready for whatever the night might hold. Ready, save for one minor



detail. And this she immediately remedied.

From the top drawer of her dressing table she removed a tiny, pearl handled automatic. Then, satisfied that it was only a little less dangerous than herself, she picked up the hem of her skirt and tucked the gun beneath her jewel-studded garter. The cold metal of the automatic snuggled close to her warm flesh as if it were glad to be there.

Perfume and pistols! The two—alone or in combination—were strangely characteristic of Nila Rand. And mystery.

And she was on mystery bent as she slipped from her cabin.

With the steady throb of twin propellers the *S. S. Eastern Star*—London to Shanghai—churned its way through a cobalt sea. From the main saloon forward came the muted notes of the ship's orchestra. Aft, from the bar, came the exciting tinkle of ice against frosted glasses and occasional bursts of distant laughter. And as Nila made her way down the carpeted passageway, muffled, feminine giggles drifted to her from the darkened deck outside.

Just now, however, neither saloon, bar nor shadowy deck held any interest for her. Her tiny gold sandals made no sound on the deep pile of the carpet as she turned into a narrow, transverse passage. Through half-closed amber eyes she read the numerals on the cabin doors as she passed, paused at last before Stateroom 57.

She looked swiftly once up and down the passageway, found it deserted. Then, leaning forward, she pressed one ear against the door. There was silence from behind the portal but a silence that was strangely alive.

NILA was conscious of a crinkly feeling at the base of her spine, that she had long since learned to associate with danger. Her pulse picked up a faster beat. Flocks of steely light appeared in the depths of her tawny eyes.



She listened intently for another moment trying desperately to analyze the distinct menace that seeped out to her from behind that closed door. And then she had it. Her teeth showed in a tight smile. Swiftly she retrieved the gun from her garter.

For some psychic sixth sense told her that even as she paused and listened on her side of the door—*someone was listening to her from the other side!*

That did not stop Nila. Such little complications only made the business in hand more intriguing. From the bag that hung pendant from her left wrist, she removed a key. Silently, with infinite patience and cunning, she in-

serted it into the key-hole; turned it so slowly that her muscles ached.

The bolt slid back at last—she turned the knob. Her gun came up, steady in steady fingers, ready for instant action.

With a sudden swift movement she pushed open the door into a well of Stygian blackness. She never hesitated. Finger tight on the trigger of her automatic she stepped through the narrow opening into the cabin beyond, closed the door behind her with her back.

Blackness swallowed her—living, breathing, palpable blackness. There was no sound. Yet she knew that there was someone else in that cabin with her . . . someone ready to . . .

And then the silence was shattered by the sudden hiss of indrawn breath—the blackness was rent asunder as a vague body materialized before her. It loomed from the floor at her feet—sprang at her with clawing and groping fingers. And unerringly, instinctively those fingers found her throat.

Nila had expected the attack from any direction but the floor. She was caught off balance, flung back. And as her arms shot up her gun was momentarily useless.

The fingers dug deeper at her wind-pipe. Her nostrils were assailed by a peculiarly pungent odor of the East. Her flesh crawled and she knew that it was a yellow man who had her by the throat.

Her back was pressed hard against the wall. In turn, the yellow man's body was pressed close to hers. His face was an indistinct blur of slanted eyes and flattened nose. His breath was hot on her cheek.

Nila knew that death, in addition to the yellow man, had her by the throat.

She did not want to die. The blood in her veins was too tempestuous for that. Life held too many joys, too many passions for her, to be thus lightly relinquished.

With one simultaneous movement she elbowed the automatic down and her knee came up. Her attacker grunted. The fingers on her throat relaxed. With a supreme effort Nila wrenched herself free, staggered along the wall.

The strap of her gown was gone—the crystal beads of one-half of her brassiere cascaded to the floor. She never knew. If she did know, she did not care.

Gratefully she breathed in huge lung-fulls of air while her eyes tried in vain to pierce the ebon darkness that hemmed her in.

She moved fast along the wall to the far side of the cabin. Sudden movement in front of her. A face loomed up—then it was blotted

out by the flash of Nila's gun. A chair went over with a crash. Something heavy slumped to the floor. Silence.

CHAPTER II

Adventurers All

FOR the space of five seconds Nila stood rigid and immobile pressed hard against the wall of the cabin. She was breathing hard. With half-shut eyes she strained her ears and listened. Dully, insistently came the pulsating throb of the engines below her. She smiled ironically at the muted notes of the orchestra in the saloon drifted into the cabin.

There were no other sounds. Cautiously she felt her way around the cabin by the walls to the door. She felt for the light switch, found it, clicked it on.

The darkness leaped back. For a long moment, Nila stood there by the door and surveyed the cabin. There was a table that was overturned—a chair. . . . And then the breath whistled sharply between her carmined lips.

Lying face down on the floor was a man. He was crumpled grotesquely, the left leg doubled up under the body, the right arm outflung. Only the back of his neck was visible—and it was a saffron yellow.

He did not move. More, Nila knew that he would never move again. Curiously she looked at the automatic that was still clenched in her fist, then with a sudden movement, whipped up her skirt and returned it to his hiding place.

Nila was assailed by two impulses. The first was to flee. But it was the second that conquered. With the exquisite grace of a panther she stepped swiftly across the room, dropped to one knee by the body.

Deftly she inserted her hand into one of the pockets of the black alpaca coat worn by the Chinaman. And so intent was she on her exploration, that she failed entirely to note when the door behind her opened—never knew when the two men entered the cabin.

One was tall, darkly handsome—and at this particular moment, the granite quality of his eyes matched his chin. The other was shorter by half a head, and despite his impeccable tuxedo, unquestionably an Oriental. High caste Manchou.

The American spoke. His voice was very icy, very polite—very menacing. "Looking for something? Perhaps I can help?"

Nila stiffened imperceptibly. Slowly her hand emerged from the pocket, slowly she rose, turned. The smile she flashed at them was a snare and a delusion. Her body half turned,

she looked at them over one raised shoulder. One bent knee accentuated the sweep of her body from breast to thigh.

She was very conscious now, of the fact that her gown was ripped, that only one-half of her brassiere clung lovingly to her flesh.

The men were very conscious of it, too.

"Hello, Jeff," purred Nila, in a cool, husky contralto. "Fancy running into you, here."

Jeff Harwood's eyes, that had been narrowed dangerously, flew wide in surprise. "Nila!" he exclaimed hoarsely and a score of emotions lived in the word. He took a long, impulsive step forward, then checked himself. If anything, his jaw became more rugged, his eyes more bitter than before. "So it's you, by God!" he grated venomously.

THE Chinaman by his side appraised the satin loveliness of Nila's skin, beamed fatuously at her. Nila beamed back—not so fatuously. She knew the type. High caste Manchou. Educated at Oxford, Harvard or Yale. Cultured, polished—and a sucker for a white woman.

With an effort the yellow man dragged his almond eyes from Nila's brazenly revealed charms and turned to Jeff.

"It appears, Jeff, old chap, that you know the lady. Why be so selfish! Don't you think you might introduce me?"

Save for a lilting, sing-song quality to his voice that marked his Oriental origin, he spoke flawless English.

"Know her!" snarled Harwood in answer "I'll say I know her." Then his lips twisted into a thin, merciless smile. He bowed mockingly, continued with heavy irony. "My dear Prince, permit me to present to you Miss Nila Rand. The notorious Nila—adventress extraordinary. Her body has the allure of a siren—her heart is as cold and frigid as marble—and her brain is as cool and calculating as the Devil's own."

"Charming," murmured the yellow man. "You do know her."

"Know her?" echoed Harwood, warming to his thesis. "Beware of her, Tao. She is cruel, cunning, wanton. She is the consummation of all the feminine vices wrapped in the body of an angel!"

Prince Tao Ping bowed at Nila. "The vices of beautiful white women, more often than are considered virtues by my people. God, Jeff, what a mate she would make for Sun-Sen!"

Sun-Sen! For some inexplicable reason the name intrigued Nila. She breathed the musical

syllables to herself, tucked it away in her memory and knew that she would never forget it.

"And who is Sun-Sen?" she asked.

"Never mind," cut in Harwood sharply. "Don't listen to her, Tao. She's a siren—a witch. She would worm the most sacred secret from you, than use it against you. Do you see what's at her feet?"

"Of course," replied Tao. He shrugged indifferently, with the typical Oriental stoic calm in the presence of death. "Wu was a good servant but one yellow man amongst the countless hordes of China is but a grain of sand. We should not question the procedure of the gods when they present us with such a glorious thing as Nila Rand."

NILA arched her eyes at the Prince, smiled provocatively. "Thank you, Prince," she said coolly. "And since introductions are in order, let me present you to Mr. Harwood. The real Mr. Harwood. He has hardly done me justice. I'll try to do better by him."

One hand on hip, she swayed across the room, trailing a subtle perfume behind her. She stopped before the two men, laughed up into Harwood's face. With insolent familiarity she reached up and straightened his tie.

"Prince," she said evenly, "meet Mr. Harwood—Mr. Jeff Harwood—adventurer—but not so extra-ordinary. He's handsome as an Adonis but there's not a brain in his head. He's quite a nice boy but if you're not careful, he'll steal your watch chain."

"And as far as his heart is concerned . . ." she confronted him squarely . . . "he's been mad about me for years."

Harwood's face twisted into a savage scowl. Roughly he grabbed Nila by her bare shoulders, shook her furiously. "So help me, that's right, damn you! I'm mad about you, Nila and you know it." Abruptly the savagery left his voice. It took on a yearning, pleading note. "Nila!" he begged. "Let's forget this farce. You and I were made for each other. Give me a break. . . ."

Gently Nila disengaged herself, turned to the Prince. "Didn't I tell you he had no brains?" she asked mockingly.

With a vitriolic oath Harwood flung her from him. "Okay, Nila, if that's the way you want it—I'll give it to you." He rocked back on his heels and his eyes and lips were bitter with the ashes of frustration. "You seem to have forgotten that you're in something of a spot." He indicated the body on the floor. "You're going to have a lot of questions to answer."

"Maybe," answered Nila. Coolly she turned

from him, confronted Tao Ping. "Have you a cigarette, Prince?" she asked archly.

Tao's saffron face broke into a wide grin. With deft fingers he flipped a jade cigarette case from his vest pocket, clicked it open and presented it to Nila with a bow.

But before she could avail herself of the courtesy, Harwood stepped forward, grasped her by the shoulder. He experienced a sadistic pleasure as his fingers dug deep into her flesh.

"No you don't!" he said harshly.

Nila pursed her lips into an alluring O. "No I don't—what?" she asked innocently.

"Play any of your siren tricks on Tao. He's a friend of mine. I warn you, Nila. This is something. . ."

She shrugged. "Pouff to your warnings, Jeff. They're just as ineffective as yourself." Ignoring the choleric glare in his eyes, she reached around him and selected a cigarette from the Prince's case. Tao held a jewel-studded lighter for her and she inhaled deeply—puffed a cloud of blue smoke into Harwood's red face.

Harwood's hands clenched into hard fists at his side. A pulse throbbed violently in his temple. It was a moment before he could speak. "So you would stoop to murder?" he said bitterly.

Nila felt at her throat a moment, then with some feminine alchemy repaired the ravages to her brasserie and to the shoulder strap of her gown. "Wouldn't you?" she asked demurely.

Harwood's snort was eloquent. Impatiently he flung away from her, crossed over to the body. Nila and the Prince followed after him.

Harwood was on one knee. Gently he rolled the still figure over. Wu's eyes were wide and staring, his mouth hung open and his yellow face was twisted into a grimace of pain. But it was not these macabre details that held Nila with a fascinated eye. It was something else, more sinister.

For protruding from beneath the yellow man's fifth rib, was the ornate hilt of a knife.

"So you killed him with a knife," said Harwood slowly.

"No," answered Nila, equally as slowly. "By that knife, I didn't kill him at all." She continued thoughtfully. "You see, I used an automatic. I fired it once. It must have been at some one else—the real murderer. . ."

"Someone else?" said Harwood sharply, and Nila did not miss the quick glance that passed between him and Tao. "What do you mean by that?"

Nila shrugged, waved her cigarette vaguely through the air. "Just what I said." Briefly

she gave them the details of her entrance into the cabin, the struggle in the dark, her shot. "The sound of a fall I heard must have been made by Wu when the killer crashed into the chair. Wu was already dead."

"Damn!" said Harwood. For the second time he and the Prince exchanged a long, significant glance.

"What do we do?" asked Tao.

"We've got to get rid of the body," answered Harwood. "Quietly! It would be fatal to have this come to light now!"

Nila clasped her hands behind her head and stretched her body sensuously before the two men. "Tell me, Jeff," she murmured, "why would it be fatal?"

HARWOOD scowled at her but his eyes were hungry as his eyes caressed the seductive curves of her body. Tao Ping's eyes were feverish bright as he feasted them on the voluptuous curve of Nila's breast as it was revealed beneath her torn gown.

"You keep out of this," said Harwood at last. "And you would be doing me a very great favor if you'd mind your own business." He recalled something for the first time and his voice became suddenly suspicious. "And by the way, how did you get aboard this boat? What are you doing here?"

Nila laughed. She pressed the tip of one finger to her lips, then transferred it to Harwood's. "Poor Jeff. I followed you, of course. That's the answer to both your questions."

"Followed me!"

"Why not! I ran across your trail in Hong Kong. You were spending money like a drunken sailor." She wagged her forefinger reprovingly under his nose. "And on ladies of very doubtful reputations."

Harwood essayed a sneer that did not quite come off. "Jealous, eh? So that's it!"

"Not at all," mocked Nila. "I hate to shatter your masculine ego but you're flattering yourself. It is simply that when Jeff Harwood is flush with money, the game is worth taking a fling at." She placed one hand on her hip and with an inviting, provocative air paraded her charms before him. "I'm cutting myself in, Jeff," she finished coolly. "That's all."

Harwood's dark eyes flared with hot desire. The woman, Nila, was a seething torment in his blood and veins. Had been for years. The perfume of her supple limbs was like strong wine to him; the rhythm of her body the ultimate expression of all beauty.

For a moment he was moved by an overpowering desire to reach out and crush her in

his arms; to smother her mocking lips with his own till she ceded his dominance.

But he did neither. He knew from bitter past experience the futility of trying. Instead, he reached out a long hand, grasped her by the wrist.

"There's one way you can cut yourself in," he said fiercely. "Just one way!"

"And that is?"

The American spoke. His voice was icy polite, 'Looking for something? Perhaps I can help.'



"Nila, for God's sake stop this farce—this continual fencing. You know that I've wanted you—more than wanted you. That I've . . ."

"Oh! So you're making love to me again."

Harwood flung her violently from him. "No!" he said bitterly. "I'm a fool. There can never be anything but war between us. And as far as cutting yourself in . . ." he laughed without humor. . . "you're mad, my dear Nila. Mad!"

She pouted her lips at him provocatively. "Maybe," she murmured. She swung on Tao.

Her eyes were dark, inscrutable, and her lips were curved in an alluring smile that would have tempted an angel out of heaven. "What do you say, Prince? Do you think I am mad?"

Tiny beads of perspiration bedewed the Prince's high forehead. His eyes glinted strangely and his long, yellow fingers itched to caress the satin skin of the flaming creature before him.

He bowed, wet his lips with the tip of a red tongue. "I think you are very beautiful," he intoned. "Very desirable."

"Then you will tell me what the mystery is about?"

Tao Ping's smile was bland, his voice smooth and suave. "Mystery is a thing to be whispered between two. The hour must be right, the place. There must be incense, lotus flowers, the lonely note of a flute . . ."

Nila laughed gaily. "If that's a proposition, I accept it . . ."

"You'll accept nothing," said Harwood coldly. Nila swung around to face him. Their eyes met and held like the steel of a pair of duelists engaging.

Harwood's face was gray, burned out with defeated passion. For a moment Nila found it in her heart to pity him. Jeff! He would always love her even though they were always at swords' points. And God knew, though Jeff didn't, that there would never be any other man for her than him.

"And now you will oblige me by getting out," continued Harwood brutally. "You will say nothing about what you have seen in this cabin. You will forget that you have seen anything." He paused a moment and his smile was very superior. "And maybe, some day, I'll tell you what it's all about."

"How sweet of you," said Nila frigidly.

"Get out!" grated Harwood, "before I forget I once loved you."

Nila held his eye for a long moment, then laughed at what she saw there. Calmly she walked to the door, opened it, turned with her hand on the knob.

"Men only forget that they have loved me, when they are dead," she said in her husky voice. And the closing of the door was a period to her words.

CHAPTER III

The Proposition

BACK in her cabin, Nila was in the act of changing from her torn gown into another when a discreet rap sounded on the door. Harwood? No; she shook her head. Jeff would not knock like that. The Prince? Nila's tawny eyes glinted with strange lights and she smiled knowingly.

She tossed aside the gown she was about to put on and slipped into a lace negligee instead. Then, with an approving glance at herself in the mirror of her dressing table, she crossed to the door.

She flung it wide in anticipation; but the anticipation was not fulfilled. It was neither Harwood nor the Prince who stood before her; and her eyes narrowed speculatively as she surveyed the stranger.

He was tall, well groomed and his tuxedo fitted him perfectly. His eyes were gray to match the patches of gray at his temples. His nose was thin and high-bridged.

He surveyed Nila coolly, brazenly and an appreciative smile twitched at his lips. He inclined his head in a nod. "Pardon me if I have interrupted," he murmured. His voice was even, well modulated, polite. But Nila was quick to sense the arrogant insinuation behind the words.

She had a very definite conviction that she wasn't going to get along with this particular representative of the male sex.

"Well?" she said coldly.

"Or if you were expecting someone—someone else," continued the stranger, "I'll call later."

"I'm expecting no one," answered Nila, "and I have no particular desire to hold your hand."

The other showed his teeth in a tight smile. "I am not here to hold your hand or have you hold mine. Permit me to introduce myself." From a small leather case he extracted a card and with a deft flourish presented it to Nila.

She glanced at it briefly, read:

MARTIN THORNDYKE

22 Leicester St., Shanghai.

Nila tapped the card against her thumb nail. "It's a charming name," said Thorndyke, "she commented dryly. "So what?"

"Aren't you going to ask me in?"

Nila was on the point of telling him to try the steeage, when some psychic sixth sense told her that the unexpected visit of Thorndyke was in some way tied up with the mystery of Jeff and Tao—and Sun-Sen.

Her frown changed to a radiant smile. She stepped back from the door, flung her arm wide in invitation. "By all means, Mr. Thorndyke, come in. Nothing intrigues me more than to entertain strange men in my cabin."

THORNDYKE stepped into the cabin, closed the door behind him. "My name means nothing to you?" he asked softly.

"Nothing. Why should it?"

Thorndyke smiled slyly. "It seems we're both interested in antiques."

"In what?"

"Very pretty," said Thorndyke. "Really, Miss Rand, as an actress, you're excellent. All that I have heard about you is less than half true."

Nila crossed the cabin to the dressing table, took a cigarette from a crystal case and lit it. "You're speaking in riddles, Mr. Thorndyke."

Thorndyke crossed swiftly to her. His mask of amiability fell away from him like a cloak. His gray eyes became steel, dangerous. "Don't think you can make a fool of me, Miss Rand. I'm here to make you a proposition. A business proposition," he added as an after thought as Nila's brows shot up.

"That's better. I'm always glad to listen to—business propositions. . . . Just what is your line—of antiques?"

Thorndyke shook his head impatiently, brushed her bantering aside. "I'll give you ten thousand pounds," he stated flatly.

Nila pursed her lips. She performed some rapid arithmetical computations and arrived at the conclusion that ten thousand pounds amount to about fifty thousand dollars.

She stiffened imperceptibly. "Ten thousand pounds is important money," she said cautiously. "You'll give it to me—for what?"

"For what you took from Tao's cabin!"

Nila's eyes flew wide, then narrowed. Carefully she crunched her cigarette in an ash tray. "Ah," she murmured softly. "So that's it. What would you say, Mr. Thorndyke, if I told you I took nothing from Tao's cabin?"

"I would say you lied."

"I thought so. But that's the truth. Maybe you'd be so kind as to tell what you think I took!"

"Bah!" snorted Thorndyke contemptuously. "You're a fool if you think you can make a fool of me." His fingers clamped around her wrist. His eyes were venomous as he placed his face a scant six inches from hers. "Listen," he said tersely. "I know you broke into Tao's cabin. I know you killed Tao's servant. I could make it very uncomfortable for you, Miss Rand. Ex-

ceedingly uncomfortable. I came to you like a gentleman. I made you a fair and honorable proposition. Ten thousand pounds for . . ."

"For something I haven't got," answered Nila. She wrenched her wrist free from his fingers. "And if I did have it, I wouldn't sell it to you. Now get out!"

"You'll regret this. . . ."

Nila shook her head. "I never regret. Mr. Thorndyke," she mocked softly. "I—get!"



Only a Chinaman could have witnessed what he had just seen and remain impassive.

Nila padded on slipped feet from her bath, a sheer negligee of cowbeby lace heightening, rather than concealing, the slender curves of her body. She crossed the room, trailing an insidious perfume behind her, paused before her dressing table. As she picked up a crystal atomizer, the negligee parted, revealing in the mirror before her an exquisite statuette carved in ivory.

Yet, as she sprayed herself with a perfumed mist, her creamy brow was furrowed in a tiny frown. As yet she had seen nothing of Shanghai. All that day she had remained there in her hotel room, pacing the floor like a caged tigress, smoking countless cigarettes, cudgeling her brains.

She moved on to the dresser, took out a black and gold step-in and a wisp of a brassiere, let the negligee fall in a scented heap at her feet and donned them. As she had suspected, Harwood was playing a deep game. And his curt refusal to let her share it only added fuel to the flames of her feminine curiosity.

Sitting on the bench before her dressing table, she drew on a sheer, silken stocking, adjusted a jeweled garter above a rounded knee.

Harwood's bitter words were a challenge to her brains, to her ability and, above all, to the greatest weapon she possessed—the allure of her flaming body.

And Nila would never refuse

to meet that challenge.

THEY had registered together, he and Tao Ping, at the Hotel Victoria a block farther down the Bund. And there was the reason that Nila had paced the floor in restless, impatient fury. Harwood was too wise to let the young Chinese out of his sight. Given a chance to exert her charms on either one, alone, and Nila knew that the tantalizing secret would be hers. No man could resist her. Not Harwood, despite his denial, despite the many times that she had outwitted him in the past. The old desire still smouldered within him—and Nila knew how to fan it into a consuming flame.

A second stocking slid smoothly up the length of a shapely limb. A second twinkling garter nestled into place. And then, for the first time in her preoccupation, Nila was aware of eyes upon her.

She pivoted swiftly on the bench, whirled to face the door. Just inside it stood a man.

Only a Chinaman could have witnessed what

CHAPTER IV

Chang Looks On Beauty

THE evening was sultry, humid. Through the open window on the third floor of the Metropole Hotel drifted the mysterious night noises of Shanghai—and the East. From the Bund below came the clatter of many vehicles, the shrill jabber of coolies, the distant creak of lateen sails of an anchored junk.

he had just seen—and remain impassive as a craven idol.

Instinctively Nila's hand flew up to conceal what gauzy black-and-gold revealed. Then before the calm, unblinking gaze of the watcher, she slowly dropped them again. In her wide amber eyes startled fear faded, gave way to interested speculation.

Rising from the bench, she swayed over toward her strange visitor and coolly inspected him.

He was huge, powerfully built, with shoulders that bulged with magnificent muscles. Never before had Nila seen a physique of such brute strength and unconsciously she thrilled to it. Yet, woman-like, she faced him in her frailty, her head held proudly high.

"Well!" she demanded arrogantly. "Who are you—and what do you want?"

ONLY the dark eyes shifted in an emotionless face. "My name is Chang," he answered tonelessly, in excellent English. "You come with me."

The last was a statement, not a question. And the brazen audacity of it brought a swift flush of color to Nila's cheeks.

A second look at that towering, yet perfectly proportioned male body before her and her indignation died as swiftly as it had been born. Chang meant what he had said—no doubt about that. With a low throaty laugh she stepped close to him, let her tiny fingers stray curiously over the knots of bulging muscle.

Then with her head cocked to one side, she nodded.

"Very well, Chang. Wait till I dress. I'm coming with you."

She re-crossed the room, busied herself for a moment at dressing table, wardrobe, opened trunk. Then with an arm laden with clinging garments she retired behind a lacquered screen to complete her toilette.

This commanding Chang intrigued her in more ways than one. Some deep-rooted instinct told Nila to follow him; told her that she was at last hot on the trail of the mystery that involved Harwood and Prince Tao, the menacing Mr. Thorndyke and the unknown owner of that intriguing name—Sun-Sen.

And it was from no sense of modesty that she retired behind the screen to dress. For when she emerged again, a vision of gold and trailing flame color, the tiny automatic nestled in the depths of the brocade purse in her hand.

She asked no questions. "I'm ready," she said simply.

In the slitted eyes of Chang appeared the

first sign of any emotion. A gleam of admiration showed in their murky depths as he bowed, opened the portal and stepped aside.

CHAPTER V

Sun-Sen—and Desire

OTHER eyes, also admiring, followed the flaming figure of Nila and her strange escort as they passed through the lobby of the hotel. On the street outside a luxurious limousine of European make stood waiting at the curb. Chang sing-songed a brief order to the slant-eyed Oriental at the wheel, then assisted Nila into the darkened interior.

She sank back on the deep cushions, took a cigarette from her purse and lit it. Then with twin streams of blue smoke curling from her nostrils, she looked idly out of the windows as they mingled with the noisy traffic of the Bund.

It was not the first time that Nila Rand had seen Shanghai. The turbaned Sikh policemen, the bronzed foreigners in topce and whites, the jabbering coolies that thronged the streets, were all familiar.

Familiar—and yet foreign, strange. For even here in the foreign concession with its hotels, its shops, its theatres, its cosmopolitan crowds, Nila felt the brooding, mysterious undercurrent of the East. And something within her own restless soul responded. A name came to her memory, a name that suggested all the glamour of the Orient in its two musical syllables.

Unconsciously she repeated it softly, aloud: "Sun-Sen."

Beside her, Chang stiffened. Then he relaxed again, turned his opaque eyes curiously upon her. "Yes," he said quietly. "I am taking you to—Sun-Sen."

A queer little thrill of anticipation coursed through Nila's veins. A half-smile played about the corners of her lips. Whatever the night might hold, she was ready for it.

The limousine threaded a maze of narrow, tortuous streets. Then it turned at last into a wide, tree-lined road that climbed swiftly upward. On either side, clinging to the slope that rose above the level of the city, were the villas of wealthy Chinese and foreign officials. Halfway to the peak the purring limousine turned off sharply to the left, followed a graveled driveway to a low, rambling building a gleam with lights.

The big car slid to a smooth halt. Chang assisted Nila to alight, then led her up a flight of broad stone steps. Far below were the modern buildings of the white man's city. Out on the

CHAPTER VI

The Symbol of the Dragon

SLOWLY Nila approached the gilded throne, stopped at last before the dais. Manchu Princess, descended from the proud emperors of China, faced Western adventuress, with a flaming, lurid past. And they were both women. Woman-like, true to their instincts, they appraised each other. And neither made the mistake of under-estimating a potential enemy.

It was Sun-Sen who spoke first. "So, you are Nila Rand." From oblique, almond eyes she studied this notorious, alien siren. Then she delivered her judgment. "You are, as I have heard, very beautiful."

It was no compliment, made to flatter. It was a stated fact. Nila inclined her head in a negligible bow. "Thank you," she answered coolly.

With a single gesture, Sun-Sen dismissed Chang and the guard who had opened the door. Sudden dark longings stirred in Nila's heart as she watched the sylph-like movements of the Princess as she approached her.

"If I may return the compliment," she said slowly, "you too, would go far in Cairo, Paris, New York."

"I will go far in China," replied Sun-Sen enigmatically. "That is much better."

"Ah," murmured Nila. "And what would the Princess Sun-Sen have about me?"

"I have heard wondrous tales about you," Nila shrugged. "Probably untrue."

Sun-Sen shook her head. "I have seen you. You are beautiful beyond measure. I believe them," she said simply. "And because you are beautiful, I can use you."

"Use me?"

"Yes—use you well," said Sun-Sen with a slow smile. "Pay you well. There is a little matter that you are admirably suited to take care of. If you succeed . . ." she broke off abruptly. "Are you interested?"

Nila lit a cigarette, extinguished the match with a flick of her wrist. "Nothing ever intrigued me more."

"Then listen well to my words. There is trouble brewing in China—serious trouble. My people suffer from famine, from disease, from dire poverty. China is torn by bandits and half a dozen warring armies."

"The present government is weak and the people grow restless. There is rebellion in the air. China—my China—demands an able ruler." The porcelain statue was now glowingly alive. Nila saw the sloe eyes gleam with

placid water the *Eastern Star* rode at anchor, a blaze of twinkling lights. Then Nila stepped across the threshold of the villa—and entered the heart of China.

The air was heavy with the scent of sandalwood. Fire-breathing dragons sprawled over silken hangings on the walls. Sprays of flowers blossomed from vases of priceless porcelain. From a teakwood pedestal an ivory Buddha gazed benignly down at her.

Still in silence Chang led the way through passages where deep-piled carpet muffled their footsteps. He paused at last before a carved door, knocked three times upon it.

It was opened from within. At a gesture from her companion, Nila drew her wrap more tightly about her, tossed back her dark curls and stepped boldly across the threshold.

She took three steps forward—then stopped, checked in mid-stride.

THE room was large, impressively severe in its few but regal furnishings. Directly opposite, at its far end, was a raised dais covered in crimson velvet. It bore a magnificent throne—the gilded Dragon Throne of Imperial China. And seated upon that throne was the most exquisite creature Nila Rand had ever seen.

She was tiny, fragile beyond belief. Sleek hair, black as a raven's wing, lay coiled above a heart-shaped face. Sloe eyes, intriguingly slanted upward at the corners, looked out above a delicate nose. Her mouth was a rosebud, startlingly crimson. Silken robes, of the imperial yellow, followed the curve of a high, young bosom and a figure virginal in its promise.

A porcelain statuette of the goddess Kwan-Yin, miraculously alive.

In the space of seconds, Nila Rand knew a score of violent, turbulent emotions. She fastened her eyes on the exotic vision before her and her mouth went suddenly hot and dry. Her breath caught sharply between her teeth and the tinted nails of her hands dug deep into her palms as she struggled with a turmoil in her soul. Never had she seen a creature more beautiful.

Torn by a thousand conflicting, illicit desires, Nila caught her lower lip between her teeth. Slowly, a single drop of salty blood oozed forth.

From behind her she heard Chang's voice, heard her own name. Then knew that he addressed her: "Her Highness—the Princess Tao Sun-Sen."

Deep down in her heart Nila knew why, with an instinct inherited through the ages, she had sensed magic in the name.

behind a plain desk was a tall Chinese, dressed in full military uniform.

The two men released their hold on her arms and coolly she marched up to the desk, confronted him across it.

"Would you mind," she demanded arrogantly, indicating the two stolid figures behind her, "explaining these—ah—just what is the Chinese equivalent for gorillas?"

The man behind the desk permitted himself a faint smile. "They've been called many things, Miss Rand," he answered. "But the Tuominyang! are not exactly—gorillas."

The Tuominyang! Nila's eyes narrowed suddenly. The dreaded Secret Police of China! Somewhere deep within her sounded a warning of danger. She studied the man before her more closely.

His skin was dark, darker than that of the average Chinese. He had the high, prominent cheek-bones of the Mongol. His mouth was a thin, cruel gash; his eyes restlessly alive. A face to command respect. A face to inspire fear. A face disturbingly familiar to Nila—yet she knew that she had never seen him before.

The slight smile that had curled his lips faded. He addressed her curtly. "You have it."

Nila's brain raced. "Have what?" she considered coolly.

"The jade dragon of the Princess Sun-Sen." The words came as a shock, yet even as she stiffened Nila knew that she had expected to hear just that. Frantically she searched the face before her for some hint, some clue, to her next play.

"You seem to know plenty," she said quietly. "But it so happens, I haven't got it."

"There is very little that goes on in China that I don't know. It's my business to know—everything."

Nilda did not miss the significance of his words. And suddenly the disturbing familiarity of his features crystallized, brought a swift rush of memory. She had seen his pictured likeness many times. And now she knew that she stood before General Fang Ti, the President of China.

"I know all about the dragon of Confucius," he continued coldly. "And I know all about Nila Rand. The Tuominyang has a complete dossier on your past, Madame." He turned abruptly on the silent men who had brought her. "Strip her!"

FOR the second time that evening, Nila's arms were seized. There was a sharp sound of tearing silk and her outer garments dropped

to a pool of gold and flame about her feet. Another wrench and a fragile wisp of black and gold fluttered down upon them. And before the brooding eyes of General Fang, revealed in all her stark loveliness, stood a creature of warm flesh, rounded limbs and mysterious allure that would have tempted an archangel out of heaven.

It was rage that suffused her cheeks with a delicate rose color—not shame. She flung back her head and the movement lifted a bosom of exquisitely-molded ivory. Her hands clenched at her sides and in all her pristine beauty she faced him, proud, defiant.

The room was silent as three men paid tribute to a vision more lovely than an opium-eater's dream. Then one of the Tuominyang tossed Nila's purse onto the desk of General Fang.

Methodically he emptied it. Jeweled compact, lay handkerchief, cigarette case and glittering lipstick spilled out across the desk top. Then his fingers brought out the tiny gun. The ghost of a smile flitted across his face as he tossed it carelessly to one side.

There was no jade dragon. And Nila's person, just then, concealed nothing. General Fang rose slowly to his feet. At a gesture from him, the two members of the Secret Police left the room.

He came around to Nila, stood before her. For long moments his eyes feasted on her slender loveliness. And in turn, Nila felt the strange, almost hypnotic personality of the man. Before his sombre gaze, her rage slowly subsided.

He took her hand, raised it to his lips. "It was like profaning a goddess," he murmured softly. "I apologize, Miss Rand."

Nila knew her power. With a tiny fingertip she traced the outline of a jagged scar down a saffron cheek, followed the straight line of a cruel mouth. "The President of China," she said huskily. "Yet beneath the uniform of a general—just a man."

His flesh quivered under her cool touch. His hand closed about her wrist, held it with the grip of a vise. His sleek black head bent forward until his hot breath fanned her cheek.

"I used to think Prince Tao a fool," he said thickly. "Now I understand his passion for white women."

Suddenly arms of steel went about her arching body and her bare flesh was crushed against the roughness of his uniform. Her tiny hands crept around under his armpits, felt the ripple of muscles on his broad back. His voice whispered hoarsely in her ear, conjured up visions of a thousand erotic delights that she

had never known. Pleasurable thrills of anticipation quivered her body.

And then a soft but imperative rapping sounded on the door.

GENERAL FANG stifled a rasping oath, released her reluctantly and went to answer it.

Nila knew that her moment had come—and gone. Swiftly she stooped, gathered up her torn garments as one of the Tuominyang, a folded message in his hand, entered the room. And while General Fang read, his face twisting into a black scowl, she draped her tattered finery as best she could about her.

The man disappeared. The general crumpled the message into a knotted fist, then became once more aware of her presence. He retrieved her purse, picked up the gun and presented it to her with a bow.

"The man is reminded that he is the President," he told her. "And the beautiful woman becomes a potential enemy. You are playing with fire, Nila Rand. You are playing with



"I could teach you the love of the Seven Dancing Virgins, love of the sickle moon and the willow wand," he said.

millions of lives, with the fate of a vast country." His eyes glowed with aroused desire, but his lips were hard and cruel. "Bring me the jade dragon and you shall be richer by twenty thousand American dollars—and the secrets of the ancient sages who knew the art of true delight. Put the dragon in the hands of my enemies—and you shall learn that I can hate as fiercely as I can love."

CHAPTER VIII

The Ruin

THE following evening, in her room in the Metropole, Nila again went through the elaborate ritual of her toilette. As she powdered and perfumed her body, she reviewed again the startling events of the night before.

She did not know which intrigued her the more, the alluring promise of exotic love on the threat of terrible and violent death. The last was as necessary to her as the first. Nila Rand had played too long for high stakes and it needed the element of danger to make the game a thrilling one.

The magnificent Chang, the mysterious Thorndyke, the exquisite Sun-Sen, the commanding General Fang. To which did she owe allegiance? Nila stood nude in all her glory before a long mirror, sprayed herself with a perfumed mist from the ivory column of her throat downward. A low, husky laugh welled from her lips. There was only one answer to that question. She owed allegiance to—herself.

A gown of gleaming black satin lay across the foot of her bed. Beside it, in a scented heap, lay a step-in of cobwebby black lace. She frowned at the garments for a moment in thoughtful speculation. Then with a sudden decision she tossed the flimsy step-in aside. Negligible as it was, that gown would reveal it.

She drew the sleek satin over her head, let it slide carelessly down over her bare flesh. The gleaming material moulded closely to her body, accentuating rather than concealing each delightful curve.

She donned a pair of sandals, spike heels and thin straps that revealed carmine-tipped toes.

Then humming softly to herself, she crossed the room, picked up the telephone and called a number, Harwood's number.

There was a moment's impatient waiting while the connection went through, then Jeff's voice drifted over the wire to her.

She made her own low, urgent, in

answer, knowing full well that a simple, dramatic appeal from her would not be denied. "Jeff, this is Nila. I've got to see you at once. It's urgent—important."

"What's happened? Where are you?" he asked sharply.

Nila smiled to herself and examined the tips of her fingers. However, her voice was still guarded. "At the office of the American Consul. I . . ."

"Wait," he answered. "I'll be right over."

The phone clicked in her ear and slowly she replaced the receiver. "Dear old Jeff," she murmured. "So faithful—and yet so stupid when dealing with a woman."

CHAPTER IX

Which Tells of the Seven Dancing Virgins

A HUNDRED masculine eyes swung to follow Nila's svelte figure as she made her way through the crowded lobby of the Hotel Victoria, and entered the elevator. If she noted them, she gave no sign, for her mind was preoccupied with other things.

Chiefly, with Harwood's wrath when he awoke to the realization that he had been tricked. Despite the many taunts she had dined at him, she did not make the mistake of underestimating him. According to her calculations, she had but a scant half hour to work, before Harwood would hot-foot it back to his hotel, seeking trouble.

And there would be blood in his eye!

Nila smiled at that. She liked Jeff very much when he was that way—masculine, dominant, a little savage and brutal. . . . In that humor he awoke some atavistic instinct in her . . . the age-old feminine desire to be mastered, physically, spiritually, mentally by the possessive male.

A tiny sigh escaped her carmined lips. If only Jeff were a little more dominant—if only he would take her! She would have an end then to those vague, mad longings that were a torment to her secret soul. An end to such impossible dreams as the lovely Sun-Sen.

Ruthlessly she put such thoughts from her mind as she stopped before the door of suite 616. She had a half-hour in which to work—to work out on the susceptible Prince Tao Ping. And if her charms failed . . . ?

She laughed at that and beat a merry tattoo on the panel of the door with her gloved hand.

A chair scraped, footsteps sounded behind the portal. It was Tao himself who opened the door to her. A cigarette drooped from his lips and in his hand was a tall, frosted drink.

His almond eyes glinted with excitement as he took in the vision of Nila on the threshold.

"A H, MISS RAND," he sing-songed. "You are just in time for a drink. The gods are indeed kind to Tao Ping!"

Nila smiled demurely. "Good evening, Prince," she said and her voice was as innocent as an angel's. "Is Mr. Harwood in?"

"No," said Tao. His round face beamed at her. "But he left word that you were to wait for him. Won't you come in?"

Wild horses could not have kept Nila out. But with cunning artistry she hesitated a moment. She was very sure of herself, and since the good prince was not above lying (in the matter of Harwood's message) when he had his eyes on a white woman, she was very sure of him also.

She stepped into the room and Tao closed the door behind her. He helped her with her wrap and for a moment his yellow fingers caressed the satin skin of her back.

Nila thrilled at the contact. She had heard many tall tales about the amorous technique of the yellow man and she was just feminine enough, perverse enough to be piqued by an insatiable curiosity. But that came later.

Tao busied himself with ice cubes, whiskey and a cocktail shaker. "This is your first visit to Shanghai—to China?"

"Yes," lied Nila.

Tao presented her with the glass. "Ah, then I envy you. You have much an store for you. Strange sights, strange tastes, strange smells." The tips of his saffron fingers trailed down one of her cheeks in a caress, touching lightly at the white column of her throat. There was magic in them, some subtle alchemy as they trailed lower with knowing cunning.

Nila's blood leaped like liquid fire in her veins at the touch. Her high pointed breasts arched with a long, indrawn breath and she veiled her eyes before the burning intensity of the Prince's.

"Strange love making, here in the East," continued Tao in a low voice. There was something hypnotic about his words, something terribly compelling in him as he slid one arm around Nila, leaned close to her. "Out of the East comes all wisdom," he murmured. "All art. And the greatest of all are the seven arts of love."

Nila felt herself slipping; her senses swooned. She knew that Tao was weaving some occult, sensuous spell over her—and she did not care. She gave herself to the embrace as he insinuated his taut body close to her.

But his lips did not seek hers. Instead, he

pressed them close to her ear and the whispering breath of him as he spoke did something mad and altogether abandoned to her soul.

"I could teach you, Nila Rand. Your body was fashioned for love—a love you have never known. Love of the Seven Dancing Virgins—Love of the sickle moon and the willow wand—love of the lantern that burns without oil."

He sensed her yielding. His voice became hypnotic. "You are no longer Nila Rand. You are Cho San the Moth and I am the . . ."

With her last conscious effort, Nila shook him off. "No!" she said hoarsely. "Not yet. Later—maybe."

She stepped from the reach of his arms and the exotic spell that had held her enthralled was shattered.

"Later?" echoed Tao.

NILA took a long swallow from her drink. She needed it. The realization that for the first time she had been completely under the spell of a man, was startling. It was a moment before she regained her poise. Then she looked up at the prince and laughed.

"Maybe," she corrected him.

Tao bowed deeply from the waist. "Even Prince Tao Ping is willing to wait for Nila Rand," he said graciously.

"Thanks," said Nila. "I'll confess the picture you painted for me is intriguing. . . ."

Tao took a long step toward her. "Then you . . ."

"But first, there is something else that intrigues me."

"Name it."

"The mystery that lives between you and Jeff."

Tao shrugged his dapper shoulders impatiently. "A mere nothing—a trifle—a silly Chinese symbol."

"A what?"

"The Jade Dragon—the Dragon of Confucius. But such things are not for beautiful women. A bit of carved stone, that's all."

Nila's smile held a promise that even the Seven Dancing Virgins could not fulfill. "And because you make light of it, I'm dying to see it. Her acting was superb. She sighed languorously. "Mystery—and the East."

Tao was deceived by her artistry. He thought that it was to his advantage—a step to the fulfillment of the erotic rituals he had hinted at—to humor her. From the inside pocket of his coat he removed a small ivory box, delicately carved.

Nila's eyes smoldered with suppressed fires as she examined it.

With the tip of one long yellow finger, Tao traced out an intricate pattern on the carving of the box. There was a tiny cleft, a hidden mechanism operated and the lid of the ivory case flew open.

Nila stared. The blazing light overhead shone down on the writhing coils of a dragon—half a dragon, so cunningly wrought that it seemed alive. Seemed to be spitting fire from its forked tongue as it lay in its ivory case.

Nila's hand reached out. At her finger tips was a symbol to China, perhaps, but to her a fortune. And in that moment she knew, that even if the price to possess it was to yield to Tao Ping—she would not stop at that.

"China and her mysterious symbols," she murmured. "And what are the symbols of love, Prince?"

CHAPTER X

The Symbol is a Gun

BUT it was not Prince Tao Ping who answered. A voice from the doorway, harsh, guttural, menacing.

"In this instance, my fine American friend, the symbol is a gun."

Nila whirled. The Prince made a pass for his hip but his hand froze there. For, standing at the far side of the room, his back to the door, was a short, squat Chinaman. His cheek bones were high, his eyes distinctly mongoloid and a livid scar that ran from one eye to his chin gave his face a peculiar sinister cast.

Nila recognized him as one of Pang Ti's men—one of the dreaded secret police of China. But more than all these details, the thing that interested her was the bulging automatic that sprouted in the yellow man's fist.

Tao, too, seemed to be fascinated by that gun that gaped hungrily at his heart. His knuckles stood out in sharp relief as he gripped the ivory case that held the Jade Dragon.

The lips of the yellow man at the door twisted into a bitter sneer. "If Prince Tao Ping was less interested in the Dance of the Seven Virgins and more in the welfare of China, it would be better for him and for his country."

Tao's eyes became black and impassive. He smiled with his lips but there was no humor in it. "So the son of a yellow dog presumes to moralize to a Prince of the Manchus?" he asked in a silky voice.

"Your house has fallen. It is long since in decay," answered the other. Cautiously, the gun leveled before him, he crossed the room. Abruptly, he sank the muzzle of his automatic deep into Tao's navel. "I do not presume,

Prince," he continued harshly. "I command." He held out his left hand. "The Dragon!" he said imperiously. "The Jade Dragon you have betrayed."

Nila's heart was filled with momentary bitterness. The priceless treasure that she had considered hers but a moment before was being ruthlessly snatched from her fingers. But she was not one to give up thus easily.

YOU ask for that which the Prince has no right to give," she said coolly. With the greatest of calm she reached out a hand and plucked the Jade Dragon from its ivory box. Casually, as if it were a mere powder-puff, she dropped it into her bag. "You see," she added with deceptive sweetness, "the Prince has already given it to me."

The sheer brazenness of her act rendered the officer momentarily speechless and powerless to act. It was the last facility that returned to him first. Swiftly he jerked the gun from Tao's hand, took a long step toward Nila. The scar that traversed one side of his cheek pulsed dully. His slitted eyes were twin agate balls of hate.

His finger tightened on the trigger. "The white woman asks for death!" he said ominously.

Nila knew that his words were no idle threat. One false move and she would seal her own death warrant. Her heart kicked out a faster beat and her mouth was suddenly hot and dry. However, she continued her magnificent bluff. "But you do not understand," she began.

"I understand that you have the Jade Dragon. I understand that you are an enemy to China. And as such it would be an offering to my distinguished ancestors to kill you. I give you two seconds to hand over the Dragon."

"Such unreasonableness," murmured Nila. With a shrug she turned to Tao. His yellow face had turned a sickly green; his eyes were hot and feverish. In that instant he was far more concerned about the imminent death that threatened the divinely formed white woman, than with the loss of his symbol of power.

He spoke with an effort. "Give it to him." That was the answer Nila had expected and that was the answer she wanted. It lent a tragic reality to the little drama she was about to enact. She was going to "give it to him" but not exactly as Tao had intended or the Tuominyang expected.

She shrugged helplessly. Slowly, reluctantly she snapped open her bag, plunged her hand in it. But instead of feeling for the Jade Dragon, her fingers wrapped themselves around the butt of her pearl-handled automatic.

SHE fired without taking the gun from the bag. Sudden pain twisted the face of the yellow man and a thin stream of blood ran crazily down his wrist from beneath the cuff of his coat.

From narrowed eyes Nila watched him intently. Her finger was still constricted on the trigger of her concealed automatic. Beads of sweat popped out on the Tuominyang's face; his lips twitched. With a mighty effort he tried to bring up his gun but couldn't quite make it. Slowly it trickled from the fingers of his shattered arm, clattered mechanically to the floor.

Nila's hand came out of her bag. The tiny automatic bulged efficiently from her fist.

"Splendid!" said Tao in sincere admiration, stepping toward her.

Nila shook her head brusquely, stepping back before his advance. She swung her automatic in a slow arc, covering the two men. "Splendid for me—yes, Tao. But not for you. Except that you haven't got a bullet in your arm, you're in the same spot as the boy friend." She laughed lightly. "I've got what I came after—and now with your kind permission, I shall retire."

Tao's face was a study in conflicting passions. "So you've tricked me?"

"Of course," answered Nila. "Men are made to be tricked by women—especially princes. But some day, maybe, I'll let you tell me more about the Love of the Seven Dancing Virgins. I'm interested."

"You're interested in seven virgins—I'm interested in one!"

THE voice came from behind Nila—from the door. It was harsh, bitter. The slam of the closing door was an explosive punctuation to the words.

Nila stiffened. Her fingers tightened on the trigger of her gun and her tawny eyes narrowed. She did not move for a moment. Savagely she wracked her brain for some way of escape from the trap she was in. The Prince and the Tuominyang were before her; behind her was . . .

Her lips curled. Many times before she had been in the same situation. And from long past experience she knew that in this particular case her gun would be of little value to her. She would have to rely on an older, more ancient and honorable weapon—her sex and the allure of her body.

She began to pivot slowly
"Drop the gun, Nila!"

Never before, thought Nila, had she heard that familiar voice so compelling, so masterful,

so unrelenting. An insipient doubt assailed her as her automatic slipped from her fingers.

She completed her turn, flashed her most seductive smile at Harwood who stood at the far side of the room, his back to the door.

"Why not, Jeff?" she murmured huskily.

Harwood's eyes were somber. He answered her smile with a snarl, hefted the heavy automatic in his fist. "This gun is the 'why not,'" he said pointedly.

Nila's brows shot up. "You would use it on me?"

"Without a moment's hesitation."

Nila beamed on him. "I love you in this—ah—this cave man role."

"Shut up!" snapped Harwood. "So you tricked me like you tricked Tao, eh?"

"You eavesdropped?"

"No; I simply listened."

"Then you must realize, dear Jeff, that I've saved the Dragon for the Prince."

"Exactly that, Nila," replied Harwood bitterly. "Now before I forget that I'm a gentleman, return the Dragon—and get out."

Nila pursed her lips. She was beginning to realize that in his present mood Harwood would be more difficult to handle than she had anticipated.

"Just like that, eh?" she challenged.

"Yes; just like that?"

"And what if I don't?"

Harwood's face was distorted by a black scowl. With long strides he crossed the room to her, pressed the muzzle of his gun against her bare flesh and leaned on it. All the bitter defeats he had suffered at her hands welled up in him; all the baffled frustrations of his desires burned bitterly in his mind.

"I'm not playing with you, Nila," he rasped. He meant what he said but Nila did not flinch away from the gun. From beneath veiled lashes she studied the granite lines of his face. And though she realized that she was experiencing one of the few defeats of her career—she was almost glad for it.

Harwood had always stirred something deep within her, though she had never let him guess it. And now, as she felt the cold nozzle of the gun eat into her flesh—the gun held in Harwood's hand—she was swept by a sudden wave of desire for him. She wanted to be mastered, dominated by him—completely.

She threw back her head. Her lips curved invitingly. The rounded column of her throat merged with the swelling rise of her breast.

"Can't we get together on this?" she asked in a husky voice.

Harwood swore explosively. "No, damn it!

I tell you, Nila, we're through, you and I. I've crawled to you for the last time. You've made a fool of me long enough. We're through, do you understand?"

"A hundred times you've laughed at me when you've had the upper hand. Now that I have it you come to me with veiled promises."

His lips worked and beads of perspiration bedewed his brow. "Your promises are lies. They are a snare and a delusion. But you've tricked me for the last time!"

Roughly he snatched the bag from her hand, stepped back from her and swiftly removed the Jade Dragon from it. Disdainfully he tossed the looted purse back to her.

"Now get out!"

Nila's heart was filled with an alien emotion. Harwood in those last few moments had stirred her more than any man had ever done before.

"You know, Jeff," she said softly, "I could go for you—sometimes."

His sneer was eloquent. "Another of your artful lies. You couldn't go for me or for any other man for the simple reason that you're queer for . . ."

Two spots of color flamed to Nila's cheeks. Her sentimental yearnings of a moment before were turned to swift anger. Her hand flashed out and before Harwood could finish his accusation she left the imprint of her five fingers across his face.

"We'll meet again, Mr. Harwood," she said acridly.

"Nila—I . . ."

"Miss Rand, to you," she answered coldly and with the righteous air of outraged virtue, she swept across the room and out the door.

CHAPTER XII

Forbidden Rapture

NILA was still burning from the defeat and insult she had suffered at Harwood's hands, when for the second time she arrived at the secluded villa on the hillside. It was close on to midnight and instead of being shown into the regal throne room, she was ushered into the holy-of-holies—the boudoir of Sun-Sen.

It was a place of subdued, rosy lights; of costly rugs and silken hangings; of gleaming cushions and scented flowers. It was barbaric in its splendor—and it awoke strange lights in Nila's tawny eyes.

Strange lights that were heightened a thousand fold by the exotic presence of Sun-Sen.

Clad in some sheer, yellow stuff, she reclined

upon a divan, heaped with multi-colored pillows. Her hair, usually coiled sleekly about her head, hung loosely down over her shoulders and an ancient crome brushed the gleaming blue-black strands. And while a vast republic tottered and a hundred warring factions brewed revolt, Sun-Sen held a jeweled mirror in her hand and admired the greatest glory that she possessed.

At Nila's entrance she looked up and the mirror slipped unheeded to the rug at her feet.

"You—you got it?" she asked eagerly.

Nila shook her head. "I had it in my hand," she answered bitterly.

Sun-Sen frowned, caught her scarlet

lower lip between her teeth. "Tao is a fool. Surely you did not let him suspect . . ."

Nila laughed shortly but there was no mirth in the sound. "If he doesn't know now, he's even more stupid than you think he is. I had no difficulty with Tao. It was . . ."

With a single sharp command, Sun-Sen dismissed her maid. "Tell me what happened," she commanded.

Nila crossed the room slowly, sank down on the divan beside her. With vivid detail she gave the Princess the history of the night's adventure. When she mentioned the Tuominyang, the sloe eyes of Sun-Sen gleamed wickedly.

"So the president knows about the Dragon, too?"

Nila's lips curved in a reminiscent smile. "The General seems to know many things," she murmured. "He knows a lot about the jade dragon—and he knows a lot about love."

"Love?" Sun-Sen jerked erect on the cushions, snapped the word. "You let him—speak to you about love?"

A delicate rose color flooded her cheeks. Her eyes blazed. Nila saw and with a distinct shock, understood. For a moment there was silence between them—a tense, electric, pregnant silence. Through veiled amber eyes, Nila searched the depths of glowing black ones. Fragments of sentences came back to her memory—"the vices of white women are sometimes considered virtues in China" . . . "the love of the Seven Dancing Virgins" . . . "a fitting mate for the glorious Tao Sun-Sen" . . .

She dropped her lashes to hide the mad exultation that had gripped her soul; to mask the growing triumph that she felt. Casually she reached out, ran her jeweled fingers lightly and caressingly through a lock of streaming ebony

hair. Her careless tones disguised her turmoil. "Why not?" she murmured. "I find your Chinese men are fascinating. The General hints of things that are secret and infinitely intriguing. And while he neglected his country, Prince Tao wasn't exactly idle. He perfected his technique."

The lightly-spoken words had all the effect Nila had intended. Sun-Sen's hands clenched into tiny fists and her slender body trembled.

"Don't listen to them!" she burst out passionately. "Men—they're worse than beasts!" Nila's fingers strayed from her hair, slid gently down the length of her arm and strange, tingling sensations followed the wake of her hand. The Princess captured her fingers, gripped them tightly, convulsively. "Nila!" her voice dropped to a tremulous whisper. "You have brains and beauty . . . you were destined for the highest glory . . . Together we will share the Dragon Throne of China . . . Together . . ."

It was a mad, impossible moment. And they let the madness have its way with them.

As though they had lived their lives just for this meeting, just for this very instant, they let themselves be carried away by some power stronger than themselves.

AND then, for some unaccountable reason, Nila thought of Jeff Harwood. Her imagination conjured up a vision of him, his handsome features scowling blackly—and her rapture turned to pain.

With a dull ache in her heart, she gently disengaged herself from the mad embrace, struggled up on the divan. Her senses reeled and as if from a far distance she heard the insistent voice of Sun-Sen.

"Only a fool struggles against destiny." Nila shook her head faintly. "Your beauty would drive me mad."

Sun-Sen's fingers strayed lightly across the bodice of her dress. "Then drink deep of it—and we will be mad together."

Nila's head cleared. Placing her two hot palms on either side of the Princess' face, she tilted back the sleek head. She touched the shadowed eyelids of Sun-Sen with her lips, the delicately chiseled nose, the ruby mouth.

"We're forgetting why I came here," she said in a strained voice.

"I would be willing to forget forever," murmured Sun-Sen. "forget everything it . . ."

"Later—maybe," answered Nila hoarsely. "We must be sensible." With an effort she made her voice business-like and precise. "Now that Tao knows what I'm up to, I'm afraid my job is going to be a difficult one."

Slowly, reluctantly, Sun-Sen returned to the realities of the situation. Rising from the divan, she crossed the room to a small taboret, took a long, Russian cigarette from an ivory case and lit it. She paced the room for a few turns, turned at last to Nila.

"Would an imitation Dragon be of any help to you?" she asked slowly.

"An imitation Dragon?"

"Yes." Sun-Sen's smile was cruel and cunning. "Not so long ago I had one made. An imitation cunningly wrought—very cunningly wrought. I thought perhaps that it might be of use some day."

Nila crossed the room to her hurriedly, an eager light in her eyes. "You thought right, Sun-Sen. It will come in handy. I have a plan."

"Good," said Sun-Sen. "But before you tell me about it, let me warn you against this imitation Dragon. I said it is cunningly wrought. It is. A tiny needle is concealed in it. Touched by incautious, unfamiliar hands, a hidden mechanism is released and the needle darts forward."

Nila's eyes clouded over. "And the needle is . . ."

Sun-Sen nodded. "Poisoned."

It was Nila's turn to pace the room. This little detail of Oriental guile didn't fit so well with her plan. Or did it? She was assailed by sudden inspiration.

"Tell me, Sun-Sen," she said hurriedly, "eau we remove the poison from the needle and put in its place some simple drug that merely renders unconsciousness. Some drug that operates swiftly."

Sun-Sen's eyes reflected the excitement in Nila's. "Yes. Very easily. But why?"

"Listen," said Nila.

Together they returned to the divan and for a long half hour their heads were bowed together as Nila unfolded the details of her plan.

And when Nila left the villa some few minutes later, she took two things away with her. The imitation Dragon with the poisoned needle—and the mad memory of Sun-Sen's hungry lips.

IT WAS after midnight when Nila returned once more to her room in the hotel. She flung off her wraps, lit a cigarette and then went at once to the telephone.

Without hesitation, she called Harwood's number, waited impatiently for the call to go through. At last his voice came over the wire to her.

"Hello, Jeff," she drawled. "Nila."

A burst of explosive profanity assaulted the



receiver. Nila restrained a smile, waited patiently for him to relieve his outraged feelings. At last he calmed down sufficiently to demand: "What in the hell do you want?"

Nila crossed one knee over the other, swung a tiny sandal rhythmically back and forth. "I want you to stop being a fool," she answered coolly.

The receiver spluttered again. And again she waited for the fireworks to subside. "I should have said—we're both being fools," she amended.

A moment of silence. Then he asked curtly: "Meaning?"

She squinted through the haze of blue smoke that curled up from the tip of her cigarette. "We're getting no place, Jeff, either of us. Really, I don't know whether China needs an Emperor, an Empress or a President—and I don't care very much. But I do know that there's plenty of American dollars in this game—and I know who needs those."

"Go on," he answered noncommittally.

She tapped the ash from her cigarette into a tray beside her. "The rest is obvious, isn't it? If we would only get together on this deal, we ought to get plenty of bidding out of the competition. And judging from the offers I've had, the sky would be the limit."

"Sounds good," admitted Harwood. And despite his mistrust of her, Nila knew that she had him interested, plenty.

"Suppose you come here tomorrow evening, after dinner," she suggested. "You know what to bring with you. I'll have the part that matches it."

"Make it nine-thirty," he answered. "I'll be there."

There was a smile on Nila's lips when she hung up the receiver. And when, some twenty minutes later, she slipped between the cool sheets of her bed, the ghost of that smile was still there.

CHAPTER XIII

Pleasure First

WHEN Harwood rapped discreetly on her door the following evening, it was the Nila that he loved who greeted him. A Nila of ravishing beauty; a Nila of smiles and rippling laughter; a Nila of inviting arms and clinging lips. And man-like, he attributed the glint of excitement in her eyes to his own masculine presence.

Nila did not disillusion him as his arms closed hungrily about her. Their bodies blended as their lips met in a long rapturous

kiss. And though Nila thrilled to the embrace, her mind raced back through the centuries to the Borgias.

She was moved by a momentary compassion for Harwood—then she stiffened. Things might have been different if he had been willing from the start to cut her into the game. And now, because he was arrogant, she would cut him out of it entirely.

For the occasion she had supplied champagne bottles in buckets of ice; Harwood's favorite brand of cigarettes in convenient boxes. And as she led him to the chaise longue and drew him down beside her on the cushions, she decided to take him over the hurdles as gently as possible.

Her curls brushed lightly across his cheek as she looked up at him. She voiced his thought. "You know, Jeff, as long as we're going to be friends, we might as well make a night of it. Business before pleasure—then."

Harwood grasped her by the shoulders, looked deep into her tawny eyes and read there the promise of a thousand delights. He stifled a groan. How many times in the years that he had known her had he thrilled to that promise! What torture he had suffered because that promise had never been fulfilled.

But tonight—tonight would be another story!

With a sudden, savage movement he crushed her to him. "Pleasure first," he demanded hoarsely.

Hungrily he feasted on the nectar of her lips, then followed the curve of her ivory throat downward. Nila trembled with an emotion that was very real. Too real. She pulled away from him, placed one hand upon his lips and stayed the kisses that burned her cool flesh. With the other she imprisoned questing fingers that slipped above a silken knee.

"Business," she repeated firmly. Then seeing his face flush darkly, she kissed him, light as a thistle-down, upon the forehead. "You see, Jeff," she murmured, "when you do things like that to me, I can't think. Listen. The *Eastern Star* sails at dawn for Frisco. If we use our brains, Jeff Harwood, Nila Rand and some fifty thousand dollars will be aboard her. But we'll have to work fast. First, did you bring Tao's half of the Dragon?"

Harwood released her with a sigh, then his lips curled curiously. "Of course. And you?"

"Of course," she echoed him.

"Good," said Harwood. "Very good." Then, with a casual gesture he removed a small box of ivory from his pocket. Nila's eyes

gleamed as she recognized it. He dropped it carelessly into her lap.

Swiftly, with an outward calm she far from felt, she traced the intricate pattern across the box's top with a lacquered fingernail. The lid flew open. And beneath, lying on its bed of crushed velvet was the bit of jade for which she had fought—for which she was still fighting—with every weapon that she possessed.

Harwood watched her narrowly. "And your half?" he asked shortly.

Nila's smile was innocent enough but her heart was beating faster than usual, as she rose from the lounge and crossed to the dressing table. Harwood reached for a cigarette, watched her from narrowed eyes for a moment. As she pulled out a drawer and felt amongst the heap of feminine things in it, he rose, strolled over to one of the windows that opened out on the Bund.

Taking one last drag on his cigarette, he flipped it in a ruby arc through the opening. He turned as Nila started to recross the room. In her hand was the ivory box.

"See, Jeff!" she said eagerly. "They match perfectly. Look."

Harwood looked into the box. And now in place of the one fragment of jade, with its design broken in many places, lay a perfect replica of a coiled dragon. He whistled softly under his breath.

"Did I hear you say something about fifty thousand dollars?" he asked.

Nila laughed, a little nervously as he took the box from her hand. "Poor boy. I suppose Tao offered you a pikor ten grand and you jumped at it."

Harwood's face flushed angrily. "Some day," he growled, "I'm going to grab that beautiful throat of yours—and break your damned neck."

"The same old Jeff," murmured Nila. "Can't decide whether to love me or kill me."

He glared at her a moment, then his lips curled in a superior smile. "Who started this?" he asked. "I call quits."

"Fair enough," answered Nila. Then her breath caught between her teeth as Harwood lifted the twin pieces of the Sacred Dragon from the ivory box. He examined them a moment and Nila was assailed by a score of emotions. She wondered whether the needle would hurt as it plunged into his flesh; whether it was really harmless after all as Sun-Sen had asured her.

AND then she was assailed by another emotion—a premonition of danger. She was aware that Harwood was no longer examining the Dragon. He was staring over her head at the door behind her—and there was a strange smile on his lips. She snatched the ivory case from his fingers and whirled sharply.

The door had opened soundlessly. Nila saw that a short, slender Chinese stood on the threshold, but she had eyes only for the oversized automatic that bulged in his fist. It's yawning black muzzle was trained unflinchingly on a direct line with her heart.

For split seconds that seemed years, Nila stood rooted to the spot, her right hand still holding the ivory basket aloft. Her brain raced to cope with this unforseen emergency. Behind her she heard Harwood's audible breathing.

The lack-lustre eyes of the intruder did not move for an instant from her face. It was he who broke the silence.

"The ivory box," he ordered. "You will please to throw it at my feet."

Slowly, inch by inch, Nila lowered her hand. Jeff—she thought frantically—why didn't Harwood do something, anything? The Chinese seemed to read her thoughts.

"If the gentleman move," he said quietly, "I will pull the gun. You will die." Then, with a little gesture of impatience, he repeated: "The ivory box."

Despite his soft-spoken threat, despite the muzzle of the gun that pointed hungrily at her bosom, Nila's soul cried out for Harwood to act.

She saw the yellow man's finger tighten slowly on the trigger of the gun. Then with a sudden, despairing gesture she flung the ivory case to the floor at his feet.

The sudden movement should have been Harwood's cue. But the man with the gun was not to be caught off guard. Slowly, deliberately, he stooped down for the earthen case. And while he reached for it, not for one instant did he spoil his aim or relax his vigilance.

He straightened up at last, slipped the precious casket into his pocket and bowed stiffly to Nila. "Thank you, lovely lady. I go now. But if you are wise, you do not pursue me too soon. If the door opens before I am gone, I shoot to kill."

CHAPTER XIV

Death Plays a Hand

THERE was a long moment of silence in the room after the door had closed behind the yellow man. It was broken by a hollow laugh from Harwood.

And that laugh exploded something in Nila's brain. She understood then, the superior smile Harwood flashed at her as he had turned from the window—realized for the first time what he had been doing at the window.

She confronted him with pale cheeks and blazing eyes. "It was a trick!" she accused. "That man was a plant. Your agent!"

Harwood bowed deeply from the waist. "Of course, my dear."

"You signaled to him when you threw your cigarette out of the window," continued Nila.

Harwood bowed again, more deeply than the first time. "Your discernment is excellent, my dear," he murmured ironically. "Too bad you didn't tumble sooner."

Never before had Nila tasted such bitter ash of defeat. To be tricked like any novice—to be made a fool of by Jeff Harwood! Of course, Harwood did not know that his agent had carried off an imitation Dragon. There was some slight satisfaction in that. Nevertheless, when she had been so supremely confident of herself, he had taken the play away from her.

He read her thoughts—and rubbed it in. "I have merely taken a leaf from your note book, my dear Nila. The ancient and honorable double-cross. You have used it so many times on me that by now I am quite expert in its use, myself. This is one time when Harwood wins."

Nila placed her hands on her hips and laughed up into his face. "You think so?"

"Of course." He lit a cigarette casually.

"And just to show you there is no hard feelings—we can still make the *Eastern Star*," he stepped in close to her, took her hand in his own. His voice dropped its bantering note, became low, urgent. "You know now, Nila that I am no fool. I have always loved you. If the two of us teamed up together, we would be unbeatable."

Nila's red lips curled scornfully. Roughly she shook his hand from hers. She had to get rid of him, with his perennial pleas of love. For the game stood exactly where it had a half-hour before and if she worked fast she might yet snatch victory from defeat.

"You're a fool, Jeff," she said shortly.

"Drop that gun, Nila!" Never before had she heard that familiar voice so masterful, so unrelenting.



He snorted. "Ha! I'm a fool because I've bested you."

"You're a bigger fool if you think that."

"Yes? And what do you mean by that?"

"You'll find out—" it was Nila's turn to be ironic—"all in good time, my dear."

Harwood looked at her narrowly, then laughed. "It's a nice routine, Nila, but it doesn't quite come off." He picked up his hat, settled it carefully on his head, and crossed to the door. Nila followed after him. "Shall I make reservations for two aboard the *Eastern Star*?" he asked.

Nila's smile was enigmatic. "Any reservations for two that are to be made, will be made by me."

Harwood grunted, wrenched open the door. He started to leave, stopped suddenly in mid-stride as a savage oath ripped off his lips. Behind him, Nila's tawny eyes flew wide.

For there, before the open door, lying on his face, lay Harwood's agent. And something in his grotesque attitude—in the sprawled legs and outflung arms—told Nila that he was dead.

Harwood dropped swiftly to one knee, rolled the body over. And what Nila's instinct had told her, was shockingly verified. Protruding from the Chinaman's breast was the hilt of a knife.

But it was not this fact, so much, as the knife itself, that held Nila's eyes. Instantly she recognized the curious design wrought upon the hilt. And she knew that the murderous dagger had been wielded by the hand of a Tuominyang—one of Fang Ti's secret police.

Harwood straightened up. His face was gray.

"Gone?" asked Nila breathlessly.

He nodded. "The Tuominyang. The game's up."

"Yes," said Nila. "The game's up—for you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say." Her mind raced frantically. "Listen, Jeff, you've lost. You're beaten. In another hour China will be a damnably unhealthy place for you—and me. Take my advice. Get aboard the *Eastern Star* at once."

"And you?" he asked dully.

"I'm staying."

Some of the old fire returned to Harwood's eyes. "Trying to get rid of me, eh? If you stay—I stay. By God, I might be beaten but I'm not running out on anything."

CHAPTER XV

The Bite of the Dragon

OUT on the placid waters of the harbor, the *Eastern Star* awaited the tide. Nila had no time to lose. And while Harwood returned to his hotel for an uncomfortable session with Prince Tao, she herself made a hasty visit to the villa of Sun-Sen.

The Princess received her in her boudoir and the eagerness with which she flew to her visitor, gave Nila a momentary twinge of pain.

"Our ruse worked? You have the Dragon?"

Sun-Sen's tiny hands gripped Nila's arms; her face, delicately flushed, looked up anxiously for confirmation. Gently Nila disengaged the clinging fingers, shook her head.

"No. But don't worry. We'll get it yet. There's still a chance if we work fast."

Swiftly she told what had happened. In stony silence Sun-Sen heard her story. And when



she learned that the ivory case had fallen into the hands of the Tuominyang, a blank despair crept into her eyes. She covered her face with her hands, as the dream of an empire crumbled about her feet.

"Then we are lost," she said in a still, tiny voice. "Not yet," answered Nila. "I haven't given up yet. I am going to pay a visit to General Fang Ti, himself."

Sun-Sen shrugged her bowed shoulders. "He would not see you. He needs you no longer. He has the sacred symbol."

"Half of it," corrected Nila quickly. "That's just the point. A hint of that—and a hint that I will bring him the other true half—and he'll see me, all right."

Sun-Sen digested that in silence for a moment. Then: "You mean..." she began slowly. "Of course. It's our only chance," answered Nila impatiently. "Give me your half of the Dragon and I'll take care of the rest."

Still the Princess hesitated. "What is to keep him from taking it from you?" she demurred. Nila laughed. "You forget—the needle."

Sun-Sen looked at her long, searching her face with dark, enigmatic eyes. Then deliberately she thrust her hand down the bosom of her robe, brought out a small packet of oiled silk fastened with scarlet seals.

"For fifteen years," she said quietly, "this treasure has never left me. You have my heart, Nila Rand." She extended the packet. "Now I trust you with—my throne."

THESE were troublous days for China and for its President. Though the hour was late Nila did not try to find the General at his imposing residence. Instead she went directly to the brick building that was the headquarters of the Tuominyang, the place where she had first met him. And as though to atone for upsetting her plans in the past, the Fates were kind.

There were half a dozen members of the secret police in the main office building when Nila entered. Swathed in chiffon and luxurious furs, her dusky head held high, she created a sudden stir as she swept into the room. Half a dozen male hearts picked up a faster beat. Half a dozen pairs of slitted eyes looked at her with admiration, with desire—with brooding suspicion.

Nila surveyed them all coolly. Then she turned to the man nearest to her.

"A message for your President—if he is here," she said imperiously. "Tell him that in his moment of victory, a woman has defeated him. Tell him, also, that Nila Rand has come to claim her reward."

The man stared at her blankly for a moment. Then, sensing a grave import behind her cryptic words, he bowed. "I will tell him, Madame."

He glided off. Nila ignored the others, who stared covertly at her. She glanced at the gem-studded watch fastened about her wrist. Then she tapped the floor impatiently with the toe of a gilded sandal.

She did not have long to wait. Her message, as she had calculated it would, had aroused the curiosity of the General. The messenger returned, bowed again.

NILA drew her furs about her shoulders and followed him. Despite her assuring words to Sun-Sen, she realized that she was playing with dynamite. General Fang Ti was a dangerous man to deal with. Let him get the slightest suspicion, the slightest hint of what she hoped to accomplish just then—and...

With an effort Nila curbed her imagination, blotted out the terrible picture of her fate as a traitor. Instead, she forced a faint smile to her lips as her guide opened the door of the President's office, stepped aside and motioned her to proceed.

Boldly she stepped across the threshold. The portal closed with a click behind her, and for the second time she found herself alone with General Fang Ti.

He rose from his desk, came forward to greet her. And Nila noticed that despite his curiosity at her visit, his eyes were wary.

"So you have come to see me," he purred. He unfastened the furred scarf from about her shoulders, letting his fingers slide caressingly over the satin smoothness of her bare back. "I should not question the gifts of the gods. But—why have you come?"

The direct question was sudden, abrupt. Nila evaded it with a low laugh. She stepped close to him, insinuated her perfumed body close to his own. "I'm bringing you two things—that you desire," she murmured. "Isn't that enough?"

A SLOW flush mantled the General's face which brought the scar on his cheek in livid relief. His slitted eyes looked down at her and Nila, reading their burning depths, knew that in his mind she once more stood before him, stripped, naked in all her stark loveliness.

"Meaning—yourself?" he asked hoarsely.

"Myself—for one," she said softly.

With a passion that would not be denied, he drew her to him, wrapped arms of steel about

her arching body and crushed his lips against hers in a long, abandoned kiss. His hands caressed the satin smoothness of her body and the atavistic emotions aroused within him distorted his features into a ferocious scowl.

"The gods are kind, tonight," he whispered. "Let us..."

Nila's nostrils flared as she drew a deep, shuddering breath. She shook herself violently, braced tiny hands against the hardness of his chest and thrust him backward. "Not yet," she begged. "First a favor."

Reluctantly he relinquished her. "Name it." Nila saw that she had aroused a passion that would not be long denied. She spoke swiftly.

"There is a white man, an American, in Shanghai who would only make further trouble for you. In a half-hour, the *Eastern Star* sails for San Francisco. I wish to see him deported."

For a moment Fang did not answer and breathlessly Nila wondered whether all her hopes were to be dashed. Then without a word he strode to the door, jerked it open and called a sharp command.

The Chinese who had admitted her glided up to the threshold, saluted. The General turned to Nila. "The man's name?" he asked.

"Geoffrey Harwood," she answered softly. Fang stiffened. Then, without another question, he turned to his subordinate and issued a series of brief orders.

"You might add," suggested Nila, "that we would not care to be disturbed—for a little while."

And with a faint smile, Fang acquiesced. The man repeated his instructions, saluted again and vanished.

Once more they were alone—and knew that they would not be disturbed. Fang came toward her, his hands outstretched, his eyes smouldering. Nila remembered his promises of love—of a strange, exotic love that she had never known. All her restless, turbulent soul cried out to her to fling herself into his arms; to forget everything else and revel in an orgy of complete abandon.

Then from far out on the harbor came the deep throated rumble of a steamer's siren. Nila shuddered. Then with a renunciation that was exquisite torture, she held up her hands, palms outward.

"Wait," she pleaded.

He stepped in mid-stride, his face a study of a dozen conflicting emotions.

"I—I want your happiness to be complete," explained Nila hurriedly. She reached into the bosom of her gown, brought forth the little

packet of oiled silk that she had received from Sun-Sen. "My other gift to you," she murmured, as she extended it.

Puzzled, the General took the packet. Impatiently he tore the crimson seals, unfolded the stiff wrappings. Then a savage guttural oath ripped from his lips. For there, in the palm of his hand, lay an exquisitely-carved bit of jade—seemingly identical with the two he already possessed.

In two long strides he reached his desk, jerked open a drawer and snatched up the ivory case that had once belonged to Prince Tao Ping. Nila hurried after him, explaining.

With knitted brows Fang listened. He stared down at the complete Dragon in the ivory box, then at the Jade Nila had just given him.

"Harwood never suspected that what I showed him was just an imitation of the real thing," continued Nila. "The Princess had it made long ago. But the workmanship is not the same. There are bad flaws in the replica. I'll show you."

She took his hand, guided his forefinger over the coils of the false dragon. "You will see the difference immediately. Feel... here..."

She poised the tip of his finger over the concealed mechanism, then suddenly pressed it hard against the jade.

FANG quivered, rasped a curse, as the hidden needle sprang deep into his flesh. The ivory case and the jade in its oiled silk clattered to the desk top. He stared for a moment at his finger, at a single drop of crimson that had oozed from the puncture. Then in a flash he suspected her treachery.

With a face terrible in the intensity of his rage, he whirled upon her. For a moment Nila knew stark fear. She shrunk back as his long arms shot out to grasp her.

A sudden paroxysm of agony seized him. His eyes rolled wildly and his knees buckled. A low moan escaped his clenched teeth and his fingers clawed at the folds of her gown as he slid to the floor.

Nila drew a long, shuddering breath as she stared down at his crumpled body. He lay on his face, his outstretched hands at her very feet. She prodded him gently with the toe of a tiny sandal, but he did not move.

Trembling from the reaction, she moved to the desk, picked up the ivory case and Sun-Sen's half of the sacred dragon. And as she held them in her hands, in her moment of triumph she hesitated.

At her feet lay General Fang, his rapturous promises still unfulfilled.

(Continued on page 90)

The Messalina of Mexico

by

HILDA RALSTON

*She was the
embodiment of purity
and flower-like loveli-
ness, this Madonna of
Mexico, and yet--*

VAL MOOREHEAD, JR., emitted a long, low whistle of surprise. His monocle, dropping from under the aristocratically quizzical eyebrow crashed on the floor, splintering into a hundred slivers.

"I say, Damon!" he ejaculated, stretching out his white manieured fingers in greeting to the tall gaunt figure which had just sauntered into the exclusive Ten O'Clock Club off the Avenue.

"Hello yourself, Val," was the dispirited answer, as the two men shook hands.

"So you're back from the land of hot tamales and chile con carne," drawled Moorehead, once more the complete master of himself. One look at Damon Hardy, erstwhile ace reporter and high-priced feature writer, intimate of the "best circles" in town, as well as devil-may-care play-boy, and Val realized that if he could get to the bottom of the startling change in Hardy, therein lay the dissipation of a long depressing stretch of afternoon.

"Have a few whiskeys with me, old chap," said Val, with a hearty slap on Hardy's shoulder. "Infernally foul weather, and all the rest, don't you know. Let's pass the time—swap stories. Haven't seen you in a dog's age."

Silently Damon slouched over to a table in a dim recess of the Club Bar, and lit a cigarette with shaking fingers. The match flickered, shivered, and snuffed out. With ready tact, Val lit his companion's cigarette up, pretending to notice nothing. Whiskey and soda arrived, and Damon downed his in a gulp, almost as in a trance. Val motioned the waiter to bring another.

"Just blow into the Big City, Damon old top?" asked Val.

Damon, seemingly startled from out of a brown study, jerked nervously, looked with unseeing eyes into and past the face of the handsome clubman.

"I—er—ah—" he muttered thickly.

"I say, old man," said Val, as he lit a monogrammed cigarette. "Don't talk awhile if you'd rather not. Waiter, another whiskey." For Hardy's second had been drained almost instantaneously.

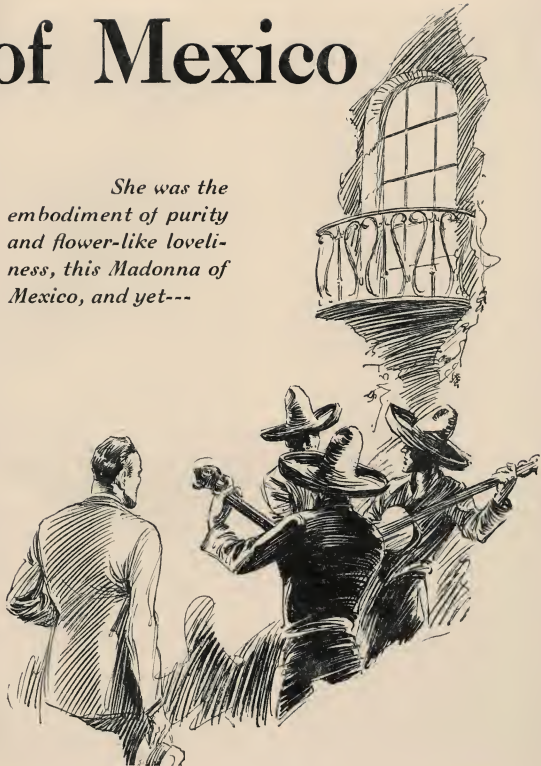
The rain, which was keeping up a monotonous drizzle, made a mournful tattoo against the window pane. Val, his curiosity piqued to the quick, was more than ever determined to get to the bottom of the complete physical and mental degeneration of his erstwhile bosom companion.

In the few minutes of silence which passed, Val recalled the old Damon he and all their mutual acquaintances had been familiar with—his brilliant scoops, his tremendous fund of athletic prowess, his easy, light-hearted ascendancy over women, his hard-boiled acceptance of the modern way of "playing the game."

"Ah," he thought, "if I didn't know old Damon had a heart of granite and steel, I'd say there was a woman at the bottom of this funk of his. No!"

YEAH," Damon, broken in suddenly, his strong, emaciated features setting into bitter lines, "Mexico, the land of sunshine, glamor and beautiful señoritas" . . .

"Waiter, another whiskey and soda—keep on bringing them. Whaddaya hafta be told



for every five minutes?" This with rising irritation in his voice.

"Forgive me, Val, for making a dashed jack-ass of myself. I'm in a terrible state—complete disintegration. Gotta get it off my chest. Was looking for you ever since I hit town. Gotta tell you. Gotta."

He buried his head in his hands for a minute. When he looked up into Val's face again, his features were composed—his eyes clear.

"I did just blow into the city, Val—but a little differently from the way I'm accustomed to—the usual fanfare and atmosphere of alcoholic jubilation being lacking. This time I came home like a whipped cur—my tail between my legs.

"If you remember correctly, you know that when the boss assigned the coveted job of covering events down Mexico City way, the boys on the paper, not to mention you and a couple of your friends, all slapped me on the shoulder. 'Lucky bun'—'Leave it to old Damon, the dotted darling of the office'—'Punchy Hardy—always getting the breaks'—but then, didn't I always get the breaks? I guess maybe I had it coming to me. They say the gods are jealous when one mortal has things running his way too long.

"Well, I hit Mexico City on a swelteringly hot night. I checked in at the best hotel, washed up and uncorked the old typewriter. I was all set. I phoned in to the office of the *Courier* to let them know I arrived, but they said, 'Nothing doing now. Take it easy, and drop into the office in the morning.'

"I was dog-tired, but somehow once you hit Mexico, the glamor of the place gets you. The Mexicanos themselves only start living after sundown anyway. Every breeze that wafts in through the windows of your balcony carries the strains of a heavy, intoxicating tango. It's mingled with the click of castanets, flowers, scents and the soft patter of feminine heels from the pavement below. The plink-plink of hundreds of guitars played by palpitating chaballeros to their senoritas was getting under my skin. I just couldn't sleep.

"So of course, Damon yielded to temptation. I left the hotel and started walking down the broad boulevard flanked by big shops, cafes, cabarets and restaurants. I guess if any of the boys that knew hard-as-nails Hardy before I left for Mexico heard me burling about the fascination of picturesque Latin-Americans and glamorous Mexican nights, they'd think I was hopped up. Well, Val, that's the way it affects you."

"I shouldn't wonder," murmured Val, taking a sip of whiskey and mentally raising a dubious eyebrow. To himself he added, "The old boy is certainly a changed man!"

"Well, I suppose that I must somewhere or other have sniffed a big drag of the mandragora bush—or whatever it is they call that mysterious weed which infects men with the virus of romance, knocking them clean out of their right minds.

"Just as I had walked about a hundred feet, one of those damned picturesque carriages, driven by two steaming stallions, heaved at me—almost from nowhere. I must have thought I was in the middle of a daisy field—because without looking where I was going, I was blithely making a crossing. Believe it or not, I, the denizen of the biggest town in the world, was knocked unconscious by a mere horse-drawn vehicle in a hick-town!

"When I came to, I was practically in the arms of the most ravishing of brunette senoritas. She was fanning me with a lacey iridescent affair, tickling my nose and exclaiming all kinds of sweet nothings in Spanish, evidently much concerned. An old dame, sitting opposite us, with gimlet eyes and a pan like a battle-axe, gazed severely at me, but also with a certain amount of concern.

"I blushed down to my toenails, and exclaimed in sheepish accents some stupid apology, repeating idiotically, 'Great grief, I'm all right—I'm all right—be all right in a minute.' But when I came to, I was ensconced in a tremendous carved walnut bed, being fed drinks by the gorgeous senorita, the old battle-axe, and a barefoot, dark-skinned servant girl.

"The gorgeous one, her flaming back orbs shooting sparks of electricity even in the semi-obscurity of the dark room, her glorious bosom heaving with emotion, says:

"'Senor, I hope you are better now. You have us so very worried. But have no fear—you will be well cared for here. I am the Senorita Emilita Maria de Vega Y Slyva Y Lopez, and everything in my house is yours.'

"I muttered some foolishness, and lay back on those tremendous downy pillows, and dropped off to sleep while vaguely estimating whether her eyelashes were an inch or an inch and a half long.

"I woke up in the early dawn. The birds were twittering like a zoo-ful of magpies. From somewhere in the courtyard, servants were talking in that musical native gabble of theirs—carrying water in and out of the house—clattering dishes, and making an infernal racket.

"My head was as heavy as a ton of coal—

and when I touched my lip, I could feel a long aching wound that reached halfway down my neck. I think they must have given me a sedative—because my mind seemed cloudy—couldn't function clearly.

"I hobbled weakly over to a big old dresser affair. When I looked into the mirror I all but fainted at the picture. By the time I had finished dressing I resembled Damon Hardy, ace-reporter, a little more closely.

A TIMID little knock at the door interrupted my operations. I called 'Come in.' In skipped the brown-skinned wench of the night before. She smiled shyly out of her great coal black eyes, and let a flood of Spanish loose on me. I could barely make out that she wanted to know how I had slept, did I want something to eat, and was I strong enough to get out of bed after my terrible 'accidente.'

"I was mostly interested in knowing how I could telephone the office, but then realized that it was quite early. So I merely told her that I desired nothing as yet. But I wanted her to hang around a little, because I was curious about the raven-haired chataleina.

"'What's your name, baby?' I asked her.

"'Chiquita, Your Honor,' she said, and rolled her liquid starers at me, the way only those tempting little half-Indian brown-skinned morsels of delight can roll them.

"'What's your mistress's name, Chiquita?' I asked, pretending not to remember what I had been told the evening before.

"But she elicited the same information that I had received before, and no more. When I tried to find out whether the Senorita's father lived in the house, when I said father, Chiquita thought that I wanted 'a Padre.'

"Suddenly she darted away, saying that she was going to bring me coffee. She returned after a few minutes with a potful of that bitter, thick black coffee they drink down there. It perked me up, and gave me a new lease on life.

"Chiquita didn't seem to want to let me out of her sight. She kept standing there, stealing looks at me from out of the edge of her eyes. She twisted the corner of her apron, and cocked her head to one side. Suddenly she plopped down at my feet, and started to caress the tip of my shoe with soft, bird-like gestures, and then, gathering more courage, attacked my ankle.

"Her sensuous little red mouth was pursed up like a wild rose, and her great shining eyes had a look of some forest kitten's. She smiled mischievously, and a small perfect set of pearly teeth glinted in the morning sun. Her blouse

slipped off a temptingly dimpled brown shoulder—and revealed a provocative little mound of rounded femininity. She half-closed her eyes—and her breath came in quick little gasps.

"I could feel my pulse beat faster—my throat constricting and a wave of desire course hotly through my veins. Those maddening little Mexican vixens!

"'Does Your Honor like little Chiquita?' she murmured in soft appealing accents.

"For answer, I slid my hand lingeringly over that tempting plateau of hers, so ill-concealed on her half-nude torso under the roughish blouse. But our little pre-breakfast cocktail was rudely shattered by the imperious clang of a bell. Somebody was ringing for Chiquita. She pressed a moist, hot kiss on my wrist, looked disappointedly at me, and darted swiftly out of my room with the light step of a jungle creature.

"I wiped the beads of perspiration from my forehead, and straightened my tie. It had really been a close shave. I determined to be a little more careful in the future before allowing these children of nature to attack me in strange domestic.

"Chiquita announced that breakfast was served in the patio. My senses, aroused by that infernal heat of animal tempo running with heavy incapability as a strong undercurrent through all Mexican life, were at a high pitch. I approached the table, for this reason, more like some ganche country bumpkin than my usual contained self.

SENORITA DE VEGA, dressed in white, was already seated at the table, as was the old battle-axe, her duenna. The Mexican bug had already bitten me—for I didn't pump their hands up and down as we do at home, but kissed the old one's hand, and the Senorita's long, slender scented fingertips, scraping into some imitation of a bow as I did so.

"I tried to thank them for their hospitality to me, and excuse my clumsiness in falling under the hoofs of their horses. But the duenna, English faltering and pained, replied in flowery Spanish manner that I must not seek to apologize as much as to be grateful to God that my life was spared.

"While talking desultorily through breakfast, I kept looking at the Senorita de Vega. But it was very difficult to catch her eye. She sat there, each perfectly modelled aristocratic feature composed, cold and impersonal as some graven image. She spoke barely above a whisper—and as she did so, seemed to look through me rather than at me. But God—she was as

perfect a type of modest feminine loveliness as I'd ever seen. Just as the little half-breed Chiquita was a delicious morsel on which to make a meal, the proximity of this proud, icy beauty was more than tantalizing. Perversely a maddening myriad of exciting visions beckoned to me, which were the more senseless because of the seeming impossibility of piercing her frigid reserve.

"Obviously, both from her looks, bearing, and residence, the *Senorita de Vega* was of very good family. If she were unmarried, the possibility of seeing and talking to her alone were practically impossible. If she were married, which I doubted, it was even more difficult. Being American, and in more or less of an official position, I had also to watch my step pretty carefully—of all of which I had been warned before leaving by the boss.

"Sitting there like a ramrod, stiff and straight, with her big swimming eyes shaded by fantastically long eyelashes, she seemed to emanate a strong sex allure that helied her virtuous pose. One look at those scarlet lips, daintily masticating infinitesimal mouthfuls of food like some animated pomegranate, and the desire flamed up in me like the tide as it surges backward and forward.

"Avidly I took in the details of her ravishing form—so discreetly yet the moreso provocatively obscured behind the thick, luxurious folds of her tight-fitting dress. From the tip of her glistening raven hair, parted in the middle like a Madonna's, thick coils nestling at the nape, to the ivory tower of her graceful swan-like neck, ending in the intoxicating promise of a snowy bosom, she was a marble statue which seemed semi-somolent, awaiting the flesh and blood sculptor to awaken it.

"Ha!"

Val Moorehead was startled from out of the images Damon was evoking, jerked back to the reality of the club bar by the livid, taut face of the raconteur.

"What is it that the Frenchman says?" continued Damon, in a mocking, bitter voice hoarse with emotion. "Oh Sappho, to reanimate the marble of your body, I would give the blood of my veins!"

"It seemed to me that even a marble statue could have felt currents of the disturbance rife in me. But not so the aristocratic *Senorita*. I tried being downright rude. After all, what woman exists who is entirely proof to the fervent admiration of a virile, not unpersonable man?"

"I fixed my eyes on her face, wildly throwing up all attempts at cautious behavior in

front of the duenna and servants. I commenced by looking at her hair—where red and blue lights glistened dazzlingly. Slowly I passed downward to the milk-whiteness of her forehead, and the proud arch of her jet black brows. Her modelled little nostrils dilated as does the pure-blooded horse's galloping against a swift wind. Her white skin fairly scintillated with the pallor of a gardenia. Still her lashes were casting long shadows on that proud, cold face. I lingered on the crimson withery of her mouth, with its cruel sensuous curves and nonchalant unconcern for my passionate longings. It did not betray by a movement or flicker recognition of my presence.

"Hungry I passed down to the little hollows of her neck, down to the curves of her breasts, undisturbed by tempests of human feeling. In my mind's eye I undressed her—slowly, lingeringly. I was studying every inch and atom of her soft, mellifluous flesh. I was caressing her, awakening the polar temperature of her stagnant blood-stream.

A tremor ran through me. Guiltily I started—and a fork clattered down upon the mosaic parquet of the patio. Imperturbably she looked up, with an expression of polite detachment. Was it possible that a creature such as this was entirely oblivious of the thoughts that teem through a man's brain when he views such as she? I could scarcely believe it.

"I stuttered and fumbled awkward excuses, gazing straight into her eyes—trying to bore down into their veiled depths. Did I imagine it, or was there suddenly a hint of fire in those lambent deepnesses? A crazy hope sprang up in me, but the next moment it seemed as though I could only have imagined it.

"The harsh, cracked voice of the old duenna broke in on my reveries.

"The *Senor* is visiting long in Mexico City?" she asked.

"I'm a newspaper correspondent," I answered, wondering whether this fact would cut any ice with the fair unapproachable.

"But she only nodded her regal head coolly, as if I were but just another traveling salesman on a lower social plane of living.

"May I be allowed to telephone my office to tell them of what has happened to me? I don't wish to impose longer on your hospitality," I said.

"They protested in the typically courteous Latin way that it was their honor to be able to hostel the *Senor American*, and summoned little Chiquita to escort me to the telephone.

WHEN we got out of ear-shot, the hitherto milk-as-honey little cat hissed at me through clenched teeth: 'Your Honor is perfidiously amorous of my lady the *Senorita*!' accompanying these clairvoyant words by a sharp pinch into my wrist, which left a scarlet imprint of tiny nails.

"Be silent!" I said, in my primitive Spanish, with as big and scaring a scowl as I could muster. She looked reproachfully at me, her

liquid, slanting brown eyes welling up with unshed tears.

"I phoned into the office, and told them of my accident. They commiserated my misfortune, and told me to take as many days as I needed to get over my accident. It was a good opportunity to beg off from a little work in order to have more free time to devote to the conquest of the *Senorita de Vega*.

"Returning from the telephone, I bade farewell to my gracious hostesses, thanking them in the best way I knew how, although certainly for floweriness and savoir faire it didn't hold a candle to their skillful performances. They insisted on my being transported to my hotel in their personal carriage. Although I felt the fool to be riding in it, with the horses' ears festooned with flowers and jingling with bells, there was no way of refusing their insistently polite proffers of transportation.

CHAPTER II

ALL the way back to the hotel my mind was teeming with a succession of tempestuous, crazy thoughts, which ran in circles through my bewildered heavy head. I'd been attracted by women before—even been 'captured' for a period of time, but only one-half or three-quarters so, never wholly. It had never before been anything but 'out of sight, out of mind.' Here I was, after a chance meeting and the exchange of a few bare words, unable to think of anything else but this woman. I was ready to sacrifice my job, neglect it and my position as a correspondent, for a few kind words from a strange Mexican *senorita*.

"I didn't know then that I had just contracted a mortal disease—that I would sacrifice job, duty, and country for the smile of her lips, the touch of her fingers, and the possession of her magnetic body. Exit the man, Damon Hardy, New York newspaperman, enter the jelly fish, the slave of Emilita de Vega's slightest caprice and whim!

"Your honor is perfidiously amorous of my lady the *Senorita*," she hissed, sinking her nails into my wrist.

FOR the first time in my life, it seemed to me that I must enlist the aid of some experienced in the game of love and courtship in Mexico. My own direct methods, up to this time more than potent with any woman that I wished to intrigue, would not now bear fruit. I



felt myself wishing that I had been born with slick black hair, and a gift for paying those artful, flattering, insincere compliments which all women lap up like cream. If I could only discover an amatory amensensis, my faltering courage, my disbelief in myself might be bolstered up. Only then, I believed, could I attain any success with this Mexican madonna of saint-like demeanor and satanic allure.

ENTERING the American bar of my hotel a while later, I despiritually looked around, morose and dissatisfied. Luck seemed to be with me, for there, sipping some fiery mixture ill in keeping with the hour of day, sat Ramon Rodríguez, a newspaperman I had known quite well in New York and Paris.

"Hello, Damon! Welcome to our fair city! Where have you been hiding for the last twenty-four hours?"

"Did I imagine it, or was there an insinuating look, fraught with meaning, in his tone?"

"I invited Rodríguez to sit down with me, and skillfully veered the conversation into channels more imperative to my interests. Of course Rodríguez, a type extremely successful with women, was just the person whose aid to enlist. As I suspected, in the manner native to him and his nationality, nothing appealed more to his love of sport than to play Cyrano to my Christian. I told him that I was frightfully and desperately enamored of a Mexican beauty of good family, but could not imagine how to get to first base with her.

"Although I could sense his reportorial nose sniffing, and knew he was bursting with curiosity for details, he was too clever and tactful to ask. He smiled, slapped me heartily, and prophesied that I would in all likelihood have her in my arms in less than no time. I was not quite as hopeful, but it made me feel much better to be told it with so much definite conviction by a past master in the art of romantic Mexican courtship.

"First of all, Damon, old chap," said Rodríguez, "I must give you a short lecture before I allow you to lose your youth and good looks over this fair unknown of yours. I'll have you know that women all over the world are all alike—varying only in slight degrees—all being animated and won by the same principles. There is only one way to win them—flattery, attention and gifts. Only one way to hold them—as they say in your lingo 'Keep 'em guessing and make 'em like it.'

"With Latin women, you must not only flatter them more than you do other nationalities, but you must seem to be more respectful

and come off in the manner of courtship. After" . . .

"Rodríguez shrugged his well-tailored shoulders, and sniffed of the flower at his buttonhole.

"But," I protested, "the woman I'm in love with is like no one else on earth. She's absolutely untouched by any worldly consideration or carnality. She's beautiful and unapproachable as an Olympian goddess—wise with the wisdom of an age-old enchantress. To win her would take someone superhuman. A little guitar plunking and impassioned love-notes thrown into her balcony windows would be spurned as bold-faced, impertinent effrontery!"

Rodríguez waved my protestations aside with a cynical air. Rolling his eyes upward with Latin expressiveness, he shrugged his shoulders again, and exclaimed with amused tolerance: "Oh these naïf Americans! Believe me, old boy, I wouldn't give you a bum steer for the world. Follow my advice, and I promise you that all the fascinating coldness of your goddess will melt like the snows of yesteryear!"

I WAS instructed to send to her house as many flowers as would fit into a carriage, accompanied by my respectful compliments to herself and duenna. In the evening I was to hire a small troupe of serenading musicians, park under her window, and wait for her to appear. Then I was to climb up the balcony (not forgetting to have a ladder in readiness should the ascent be too difficult) and upon gaining foothold on terra firma, say nothing, but cover her hands with passionate kisses and very respectful looks. Then disappear, with proper earth-shaking regret visible on my every manly lineament.

"It was still hard for me to believe that Rodríguez really knew how to win this particular woman, for I conceived Emilia to be on a higher, more unattainable plane than any other mortal female I had conjured up in my most vivid imagination.

"But I promised that for his kind collaboration the least I could do was try his method and await some kind of results. He shook hands warmly, and wished me all kinds of success. He supplied me with data about where to procure musicians, the florist shop with the most reliable service, and said that he would await me in the bar until after my expedition.

"The flowers and carriage, with the note, being disposed of, I went up to my room to rest. I could not achieve any kind of composure or rest. Lying there with my aching head on high, too-soft pillows, no matter what I did it

was impossible to banish visions that assailed me. Closed or open, the form of Emilia floated in front of my eyes. Sometimes she seemed so near and real that her intoxicating perfume choked my nostrils. It seemed as if her frigid calm was a torment especially invented by the devil to taunt and mock my helpless, tortured being.

I MUST have dropped off to sleep for a few minutes—for in a dream Emilia, shining and bright, beckoned to me with round, soft arms. I went to her eagerly. She opened them to me and caressed my hair. I sought her lips. She yielded them. Eager to snatch heaven, I awoke holding one of those ridiculously bulging feather pillows in desperate, clutching embrace!

"It was mercifully the hour appointed to meet the musicians. I took a carriage, and slunk far away in a corner, with my hat over my eyes. I had still not gotten over being inhibited. It appeared to me that I was playing the saps. The Mexicans may be used to it, but I wasn't.

ARRIVING at the garden gate of Emilia's house, I was joined by three dark guitar players. I told them where her balcony was, and they took their station in front of it. "Estrelita!—Little Star!—will always be to me one of the most poignantly lovely songs in the world. I can at this moment feel my heart beating to its every note and plaintive chord.

"My heart was in my mouth—my soul in my eyes—you might say. I eagerly gazed up at her window—wondering whether, as Rodríguez said, Emilia in true woman fashion, would be flattered rather than haughty at my attention. Would she vouchsafe me at least one glance—the suggestion of a smile? Of course I never expected that she would allow me to kiss the tips of her fair, cool fingers.

"Suddenly my heart almost stopped functioning. There appeared a light in Emilia's window. She was there. She had heard the music. Maybe—would she—would the Power Above be kind—would she emerge for a moment? Would I glimpse the ravishing form, the haunting allure of that delicious brunette beauty for an instant?

"Hardly giving credence to my eyes, I glimpsed a regal figure, which undulated rather than walked out onto the balcony. I stepped away from under the shadows, bareheaded, clumsy, and terribly perturbed—like a school-boy in the throes of his first awakening. My arms seemed weighted with lead. My breath

scorched my nostrils, coming in quick, short pants. Hungrily I devoured every line and curve of her face, gazing supplicatingly at her. She stood there an instant, like some ethereal bird poised for flight. I put my hand to my heart—and held it there, while gazing at her. She looked at me for a fleeting second—and the corners of her mysterious, luscious mouth curved in the glorious promise of a half-smile!

"Perhaps that was the crucial moment for me to take my manhood in my two hands and pursue opportunity—spring over the ivied trellis, fall on my knees, showering upon her petal-like fingers and desirable body a rain of impassioned caresses. But I was too humble—too deliriously happy at the tiny sign of kindness from her to take advantage of it. When I recovered from my swoon of blinding happiness, the heavenly portent of delights to come, she had already disappeared into the fastness of her chamber.

I RODE home as one who has drunk deep of the headiest champagne—or better still, potent tequila, the native Mexican drink which rises to the brain, almost instantaneously producing a feeling of superhuman masculine supremacy, and fantastic nuances of sensual exhilaration!

CHAPTER III

RAMON was drinking at the bar. He listened to my incoherent ravings with a tolerant, half-pitying grimace, murmuring deprecatingly that I should have worked a little faster. But I was too full of ecstasy over what I considered more than success.

"I fell asleep with Emilia's name on my lips, and her face before my eyes. I again dreamed that she was beckoning me to her with open arms, but she always disappeared into thin air when I made to clasp her to me.

"The next day, still taking advantage of my late accident to shun the office, I visited the best emporium in town to select some jewel fit for my beautiful innamorata. I selected a ring of exquisite workmanship and pure-water stone, which was kind of a tax on the none-too-prosperous journalistic exchequer. Truthfully, unless Ramon had assured me that that was the best way on winning Emilia's regard, I should have hesitated before offering her such token of my regard, as she might easily have considered it presumptuous of me. But he assured me that I was only doing the proper thing. I enclosed the most burning of love notes, begging her

humbly to accept it, along with my heart and everything I possessed.

THAT night I again serenaded her, and she appeared more glamorous and exotic than ever, a thousand times more bewitching and titivating. My blood was on fire with a mad desire to spring upon the balcony—upon her—but I was still too timid, too unbelieving of the miracle of any kind of success to attempt it. I did pluck up the courage to ask her whether I might come again to serenade.

"She drooped her raven head like a languorous orchid on its slender stem, veiling her eyes beneath their heavy black fringe, and toyed gracefully with the question and the fan, which swayed and fluttered like some phosphorescent butterfly. I palpitated while she coyly flirted with the idea of keeping me vacillating between hope and despair. An owl hooted in the eerie stillness. As she made to turn toward her door, she slowly inclined her head in assent, and disappeared.

"I sped home in the carriage, wildly exultant. So Ramon was right! Emilita was unquestionably looking upon me with favor—for had she not accepted my present, and given me permission to serenade her once more? Fortune was kind—life was good—love was marvelous!

"I lived but for the moment when I would see Emilita again. My sleep during the night was as usual disturbed. So were my waking moments. She had become my monomania. Nothing mattered to me but the thrill of her presence—the longing to possess her body, her soul, her destiny.

"I haunted jewelry shops all over the city and selected a rare and expensive bracelet which I sent to her by special messenger along with a lengthy flaming letter of love.

"I could not bear to go to the office—for I knew that it was impossible to concentrate on work while my brain teemed incessantly with tantalizing images of Emilita.

THAT night after the first few notes of the serenade had sounded through the inky stillness of the night, Emilita appeared sooner than usual. She was dazzling in white, red carnations at the ear, and a high tortoise shell comb towering over her head. She smiled with a delicious sweetness, her ruby mouth moist and arched with erotic promise. She motioned to me to send off the musicians. I pressed a generous tip into their hands and they disappeared. The next moment the light went out of her window. Suddenly she was coming toward me.

"Shaking and trembling like a leaf at the first electric proximity of Emilita, I guided her with my arm down a small path leading to a little grove of honeysuckle. I poured out a tumultuous pean of love words, trying to catch a glimpse of her demurely downcast eyes. Waving her fan in rhythm to the sensuous roll of her hips, she allowed me to lead her to a rustic bench which hid us from the house. She sank down gracefully, as she did everything else. At last I was here, close enough to the object of my sick passion, to inhale the odor of her rippling flesh.

SHE raised her heavy eyelids, and looked at me in mute invitation. The carnine allure of her arched flower-mouth—her patrician nostrils quivering, permitted tiny little zephyrs of breath to flare through. . . . God—I lost my head completely! Deliriously I grabbed her like a tiger who had not eaten meat for days. Burningly I pressed brutal kisses on her lips, eyes, neck and shoulders. She was like molten fire melting and palpitating in my embrace.

"Feverishly we held each other in a desperation of amorous frenzy—oblivious of all. She answered my caresses not like a madonna, but like a she-devil incarnate!

"I love you—I love you!" I cried hoarsely, in a strange far-away voice that I never could have believed possible of myself.

"I am mad about you, I must have you!" I muttered wildly.

"For answer she twined her sinuous cool arms around my neck, kissed me long and lingeringly with a scorching bite that ran through me like a magnetic current and sent a spurt of blood down my cheek.

"Our hearts beat a loud tattoo against each other. It seemed to me that they could be heard all the way into the dark house that stood as a sentinel to our stolen amour. Slowly she yielded her pliant form to me in palpitating acquiescence. In another moment she would have been mine. Suddenly footsteps resumed on the gravel.

"Dio mio!" she cried in alarm, "someone is coming!"

"For a split second we waited with blanched faces and hammering pulses. In her agitation she was even more gloriously beautiful and desirable than ever. Her bearing was possessed as always, anxiety alone betrayed by a long, sharp dig of her nails into the palm of my hand which she held clutched in vise-like grip.

"Ah, thank God—it is one of the servants—and he has gone in the other direction," she whispered. "But I must go now. It is danger-

ous for me to be here. I must go, *Senor American!*"

"But I must see you—we must be alone," I pleaded.

"Take this address—go there tomorrow at four. It is the house of a friend. A servant will admit you, and ask you no questions. Adios—*hasta manana!*" she whispered.

"With a liquid burning glance into my eyes she was gone—into the inky blackness of the night like some dark inhabitant of the ethereal world.



"Dio Mio!" she cried,
"some one is coming!"

MORE dead than alive, still shaking from the recent scene, I stumbled and groped my way back to the carriage. The driver, dozing away on his seat, required some severe shaking before he could be made to understand that I wanted to be driven home.

"Arriving at the hotel, I could hardly wait to reach my room before examining the address Emilita had given me. But it told me very little. From what I gathered, after having been but a few days in Mexico City, the apartment seemed to be in a modest part of the town. I did not spend overmuch time in figuring out what or where the neighborhood was. It was all sufficient for me to know that I had been granted a decisive rendezvous with the queen of my heart.

CHAPTER IV

THE day was heavy and sultry. Long before the appointed hour I was counting the minutes that separated me from the consummation of my blissful expectations.

"On the dot of four o'clock I presented myself at the address given me. The door was opened, first only a crack and then a little more of it, by a dried old crone, toothless and dim-eyed, bent over almost double with age. Silently she beckoned with one bony finger for me to follow her.

"We ascended thick, richly carpeted stairs to an upper floor. The furnishings were of the most luxurious and in the best of taste. Paintings depicting the history of Mexico—and among them some I recognized as Orozcos and Diego Riveras, decorated the walls. An aroma of heavy, exotic perfume permeated the air. Evidently Emilita's friend, whoever it was, was a person of some means and taste as well. Having arrived at the top of the stairs, the old crone motioned that I was to push aside

the heavy obscuring portieres and pass on.

"The parting of the curtains revealed a tremendous room in the center of which stood a large divan covered with luxurious pillows, lay—Emilita!

"Val, it's hard to describe to you what mingled feelings struggled for ascendancy over me in that instant. They would be as hard to describe to you as what I felt when I first glimpsed Emilita.

"But something stole over me—a premonition or sixth sense—warning me that I was heading for shipwreck of some sort. In the excitation of the first moment of meeting my beloved one alone, caution and reserve were cast to the four winds. But still deep down, an ever-present tiny gnawing sensation which gave off an irritating twinge even in this ecstatic moment, seemed to tell me that something boded me no good.

EMILITA lay there, languorous as a Persian kitten, an exotic flower, smoking a cigarette from a long brilliant jade holder. Her eyes, giving off animal glints of deep amber, swam in a luminous mist of passion, sunk deep in her sockets. The ivory of her fascinating skin was tinged at the cheek-bones with an unwonted flash of primrose. The glorious raven-wing mass of locks rippled a yard behind her upon the velvet of the divan. The nun-like enshrouding of her titivating body was absent today. For on this auspicious occasion the Mexican Tiger-Lily was resplendent in sheerest of sheer negligees, diaphanously pink—the supple lines of her graceful thighs shimmering and nude as mist at dawning.

"A hammer beating furiously in my temples—a deep upsurge of passion within me—I approached the divan. A slow, lazy smile animated her visage.

"Damon," she enunciated, in husky, musical contralto.

"I buried my head in her tresses. She put aside the cigarette holder with cool, unhurried gestures, and raised her arm languidly above her head. Reverently I gazed at her—struggling between the desire to worship at her feet and crush her to me as a glorious human male does his jungle mate.

"She gazed mockingly at me, arching her back, which brought into high relief the perfect globes of bosom that the Great Sculptor had given his daughter.

"Is it to adore me from afar that you have come here to met? she drawled provocatively, pulling me passionately by the hair, biting my ear. 'Take me now.' . . .

VAL," said Damon, breaking off the thread of the story, and wiping the beads of perspiration from his brow, a dark look of intense pain and suffering on his face, "I can't tell you what kind of a woman Emilita was!

"Could I call her a devil? She had moments of satanic, erotic passion, even cruelty. Could I call her a madonna? There were moments when she was cold—frigidly, glacially calm as

a vampire, with the holy light of purity illuminating her eyes. Then she would make the sign of the cross over me, and pray for our immortal souls. In either of these two extremes I felt that I was her slave—or, *ag*. She had but to snap her finger, and I would have jumped from the window, or under a team of horses to be trampled into jelly. She had infected my blood. I could neither live nor breathe without her—nor think of aught but her. And that, my friend, was the trouble. For she discovered it.

"And that was the beginning of the end. She then told me that at times I attracted her, but that at other times she merely tolerated me. I begged her to tell me what I must do in order to make myself imperative to her. She would shrug her shoulders in that maddening Latin way, and say, 'Be a man—master me—make me your slave.' At which I could only fall at her feet and kiss each pink little scented toe in a frenzy of adoration. Whereupon she would open her kittenish rose-bud mouth and yawn behind dainty white fingers.

"Come the time when she no longer bothered to yawn behind fingers but did it openly. In desperation, I plied her with jewels—gowns—perfume—anything to make her smile at me—as the drowning man clings to a spar of wood. For I knew that she was avaricious and acquisitive, and I did not disdain stooping to any method to make her smile on me. She would accept these presents, for which I was ruining myself, with small coos of delight, or even coolly at times, with a pretense of boredom, for she knew that I only desired to make her happy.

"I commenced to receive wires from the New York office telling me that they were forced to blue-pencil more and more of my stuff—that if it didn't improve I would be recalled. But even that made no difference to me. Nothing made any difference to me but the kind smile of my beautiful sadistic mistress.

ONE day when I came at four o'clock for our usual rendezvous, the old crone took longer to open the door to me. It seemed to me that I heard a low baritone voice speaking rapidly in Spanish. The next instant a door in another portion of the house slammed hard, and I was admitted.

"My sixth sense again warned me that Emilita had been entertaining a man. I determined not to show my jealousy, but one look at her gay, flushed face, and sweet, unusually gracious greeting to me, spoke volumes—and I knew that I had cause to be jealous! Throwing caution and sense to the winds, I accused her out-

right of double-crossing me. She made an innocent face, and told me peremptorily not to be a fool.

THE next day I was told that the Senorita was "not at home." I controlled my wild rage, but patrolled the street in front of her apartment. About an hour later a man walked out through the door. I followed him. When I touched him on the shoulder, he wheeled around abruptly—revealing the face of none other than my guide and mentor in matters amatory—Ramon Rodriguez himself!

"Well, Damon, and how are you? he asked, in an amiably cordial tone of voice.

"What the hell do you call this—you snake-in-the-grass?" I shrieked furiously.

"I say, old man, what's up? What's all the shouting about? he answered in undisguised surprise.

"Did I just see you coming out of a young lady's house, and did you or didn't you come out of there yesterday at the same hour? I questioned angrily.

"Why y-yes," he said hesitatingly. 'But really, Damon, I fail to see the reason for your questions. I know that we Mexicans differ somewhat from you on our points of view in certain matters, but it's hardly in good taste for me to divulge such intimate matters where a woman is concerned. Is it?' he said persuasively.

"To make a long story short, he was and had been her lover for some time. And not only he, but one or two others. As a matter of fact, he didn't wish to seem too much of a cad, but she had also been the mistress and still was, of a gentleman very important in the Mexican diplomatic service for a number of years.

"I received the thunderbolt of information that my adored goddess was a cocotte of the

first town—an acknowledged denizen of the demi-monde—with paralyzed incredulity. I remonstrated with Rodriguez.

"Look here, Damon," said Rodriguez, 'I swear that I never suspected Emilita of being mixed up with you in any way—she's such a cagey, sly little beast. But had I known it, I should have gone to some lengths to keep you in ignorance of the real circumstances. I feel that the love you bear for her is too precious to you to have been spoiled by me. After all, as far as I'm concerned, Emilita is just another woman—a damn good mistress, but not unique by any means. And just a little too generous with her favors, besides, for my taste.

"But as far as your love for her," he continued, 'it is sufficient that to you she was holy—an ethereal, spiritual passion. What difference whom and what you love, Damon, as long as it is all-important to you. Give me your hand, old boy, and believe me, I'm sincerely sorry. I would give a lot not to have had this happen.'

"We shook hands. Not being able to resist his open and aboveboard sportsmanlike attitude, we parted friends. I walked back to Emilita's. I knocked on the door, and imperiously told the old crone to let me in whether or not the Senorita was 'in the mood for receiving' just then. She demurred, but I swept her aside and stalked furiously into the boudoir which

(Continued on page 88)



"What is the meaning of this complete lack of manners and violation of my privacy?" she said furiously.

SATAN'S Step-Daughter

by
THELMA ELLIS

*She was only an
ex-manicurist from
New Jersey, but her
finesse at love and
intrigue made her---*



Y^E GODS, but it's hot in this damn place!" "Hawk" Gleason mopped the perspiration off his face and neck with his damp handkerchief, and then tossed off the balance of his "brandy pawnee." "I've figured out a scheme that will get us out of Bombay in short order if it works." He eyed "Countess" Zita Devereaux speculatively. "How much money have you left, Zita?"

Zita's face was an immobile mask of feminine loveliness, as, with graceful deliberation, she laid her cigarette, in its long, jade-green holder, upon a bronze tray, which rested on the polished blackwood table, there beside her couch. She raised herself to a sitting position and drew out the drawer in the table. From it, she took a small chamois bag, which she opened. She emptied the contents on her scented palm. There were but five rupees and four annas in it.

"Zat, *mon ami*, ces all ze money Zita haf!" With her lids drawn low over her greenish eyes, she watched Gleason's lean, brown, aquiline face closely.

"I've got but little more," Gleason told her, "and we certainly can't get out of here without money. Would you risk your life," and here he smiled cynically, "your reputation for say twenty-five thousand American dollars?"

"Who wouldn't, *mon cheri*?"

"Say," said Gleason wriggling around in his chair in irritation, "you've my permission to ean that French chatter when you're with me. Remember, I knew you when you were plain Sadie Dumboski, and were trimming customers and their finger nails in that little punk barber shop in Newark, New Jersey."



"I've got to practice on somebody," Zita answered him peevishly, as a dangerous light came into her eyes. The fool! He had reminded her of her sordid past just once too often. After all, she had learned all he could teach her! She'd ditch him at the first opportunity, before he got rid of her. He probably thought she didn't know about that brown-eyed Kashmiri huzzy. Well, time would soon prove who was the cleverer of the two!

Together, as Gleason had often remarked, with his brains and her beauty they could conquer the world! His brains, indeed! She'd soon demonstrate who really did have the brains of the outfit!

For several months, now, they had been in hiding in Bombay, because of the notoriety which had surrounded the sale of the bonds they had stolen and sold in Paris. It was there that Zita had thought of calling herself a "Countess" and decided to acquire a smattering of French to go with the title.

HAWK GLEASON, his white suit, crumpled and mussed, slumped down in the wicker chair, there beside Zita. He rested his well-shaped jaw upon his chest and stared at her in studied contemplation. He watched her replace the money. She had lovely hands, smooth, white, graceful, with tapering fingers and sharp, well-kept nails.

A thin, white, silken garment was fastened loosely around her devastating and beautifully rounded young body. There was that something about her which maddened him—intoxicated his senses. A woman with short, curly, auburn hair, whose body dripped passion in its every movement, but whose mind was as cold as a cake of ice.

Zita knocked the ashes from her cigarette and slid the holder between her petulant red lips. She leaned back on the pile of silken cushions and looked intensely at Gleason. Tall he was, and broad shouldered, with graying black hair and long, restless fingers.

"You were about to tell me of a scheme to make money," she reminded him.

"Ever hear of a red diamond?" he asked her, watching her narrowly.

"Oui, I zink I haf," she continued with her foreign accent, because she was aware of the irritation it caused him. "Zey are verry, verry rare and worth much money, *n'est ce pas?*"

"You never said a truer word, Zita, my dear. Well, early this afternoon I was drinking with 'Black Duke' O'Malley. He was pretty damn drunk and very short of cash. Finally, he became quite chummy with me. Took me aside

and showed me one of these red diamonds. Asked me if I couldn't sell it for him. I asked him where he got the bloom'n' thing, but he wouldn't tell."

"Probably he stole it from one of the temples. Maybe it's an eye out of Kali, the drinker of blood. Or belongs to Hanuman, the scarlet monkey-god, or even Ganesha."

"Either that," granted Gleason, who, in his excitement, snapped out of his languid position and was grasping the arms of the chair, until his knuckles showed white, as he sat tensed forward, "or else he took it from the guy who did steal it. He'd never have showed it to me if he hadn't been drunk."

"Was it beautiful—the stone?" Zita's green eyes took on a greedy, calculating glitter.

"Lord, girl, I never saw anything more beautiful in my life!"

"I suppose you want me to make this O'Malley guy fall for me and snatch the stone when he isn't looking; is that it?"

"You're catching on! I've already contacted that enormously wealthy Mrs. Leland, who is a connoisseur of rare gems. She certainly knows her jewels! She said she would pay me fifty thousand dollars for it, if the diamond was all I said it was."

The liar, thought Zita, he's going to receive almost double that amount. He'll get me to do the dirty work and he'll grab more than his share of the rake-off and then leave me stranded here or have somebody kill me. She smiled within herself because she knew from past experience that her hunches were generally correct.

LISTEN, Hawk," planned Zita, "you find O'Malley. Tell him you've a buyer for his diamond. A woman. Get him to wait some place for me. You take me to him. Introduce us. I'll suggest he take me to his lodging and then I'll get his diamond."

"Say, girlie, that's a better idea than mine. When old Leland buys the diamond we'll be in the gravy and O'Malley won't be able to squeal to the authorities because it is probably stolen anyway."

"In addition, Hawk, we'll put what money we have together and you see if that old Parsee jewel cutter can't make you a substitute gem. You stay with Malarja while he does it, to see that he doesn't make a snatch. Then, after Mrs. Leland has examined the diamond and paid her money, you do a bit of your sleight-of-hand work and substitute the glass one. In that way we'll have both the money and the diamond. Make her come to your rooms so you can wrap

it up elaborately. By the time she reaches home, we will have sailed away on the first vessel. Have her bring the money in small bills, American money, of course."

"Hawk" Gleason leaped to his feet. He smacked his right fist in the palm of his other hand. "By Godfrey, Zita, that's a swell idea! I believe you're cutting your wisdom teeth at last!"

"Oh, yeah?" sneered the girl under her breath. Aloud she said: "Go on into your own room and change and then get out and round up O'Malley. In the meantime I'll dress and be ready for you to take me with you. While I'm getting the diamond you bring Malarja here with his tools and whatever else is necessary to make a substitute red diamond. Early tomorrow morning have Mrs. Leland come here, and in the meantime we'll pack and book passage on the first steamer leaving Bombay, regardless of where its headed for."

"We can't go to France or London," Gleason reminded her.

"Shut up and get out of my room!" Zita sprang from the couch, the heat—everything else forgotten in the preparation for a new adventure.

SHE unclasped her white silken robe and let it fall in a discarded heap upon the matting that covered the floor and then hurried into the small closet-like room, which served as a bathroom. Zita wrinkled up her nose in disgust as she poured tepid water into a low, flat basin on which was painted the helleolithic design of Zoroaster. Damn the luck which had made them move from the most expensive hotel in Bombay to a cheaper one, and from there, to one cheap place after another, until they had finally come to this hot, odorous rooming house.

Zita stepped into the water and sponged off her lovely body as best she could. It was better than no bath at all. She dried herself and sprayed her body, with the balance of her exotic, expensive perfume; the tiny globules glistening momentarily on her unruly red curls, her white neck, her rounded bosom, smooth abdomen, shapely thighs, youthfully rounded legs and her long, narrow bare feet with their painted toe-nails.

Zita placed her traveling bag on a table near the window so she could see herself in the mirror fastened inside the lid. The slatted blind at the window cut the slanting rays of the setting sun, as she shone warmly upon her nude body, as she carefully and skillfully curled her hair and fastened it behind her ears with imitation jeweled star pins. Beautifully carved

green ear-rings she screwed into her small, perfectly formed ears. A bit of shadow for her eyes, rouge for her cheeks, scarlet for her lips. Powder.

She might have to wait a long time for Hawk Gleason, but she must be ready when he came for her. Funny old world. One minute everything looked so black. The next, good luck and fortune was so near you could reach out your hand and gather 'em to you.

Zita stepped into lacey panties and then drew filmy silk hose up over her lovely legs. Onto her right leg she strapped her gun holster and tucked her little flat .22 automatic into it. She'd probably have much need of that little toy before the night was over.

Silver slippers next and then her shimmering evening dress, with its very low-cut back and its daintily scissored front. The mirror was almost inadequate, but she knew from past experience that she looked very desirable, with her eyes matching her gown and her emotions matching nothing at all.

There followed two hours of long waiting, during which she smoked innumerable cigarettes, made herself some tea, and ate some crackers. If he'd only hurry!

CHAPTER II

THE swift night descended like the lid on an enormous dutch oven. Zita drew up her blinds and raised the lattice on her little balcony. The smells, the noise and the confusion of the city seeped in loudly upon her consciousness. There was the rumble of *ekkas* and the coarse shouts of their drivers. Hindus, Sikhs, Arabs, Malays and Parsees passed and repassed in the road below her balcony.

Suddenly, there came a knock on her door. Swiftly Zita turned from the balcony. She found matches and lighted the oil lamp. She opened the door. The *chowkidar* stood outside with his hand on the shoulder of a dirty little *musachi*, in whose hand was a slip of paper. "Yes, yes," said Zita anxiously, "what is it?"

"It is desired that *Mem-sahib* read *chit*," the *chowkidar* said to her.

Zita took the paper. The note was from Hawk. He wanted her to come to the "Ragoon," a rather notorious drinking place. She nodded, and at the sight of the boy's outstretched palm, she went to the blackwood table and took out the *chamais* bag, from which she extracted an anna. She gave it to the boy who scampered off.

"*Mem-sahib* wishes *ghari!* Right away!" The *chowkidar* bowed and started down the

stone steps to the floor below. Zita examined what money she had into a small silver wrist bag. She threw a light-weight silver-sheen cape about her bare shoulders and blew out the light. She left the room and looked the door behind her.

A HALF-HOUR later she entered the doorway of the "Ragoon." Noise, confusion, habble of many tongues, smoke, liquor fumes, shrill laughter and music rushed toward her, saturating her with the atmosphere of the place.

Through the blue haze she discerned three native dancing girls, scantily clad, and undulating forms of polished glass, about which men of all nationalities were grouped. Weird, pulsating music from a thin, high-pitched wind instrument, and the rhythmic beat of a hand-drum, accompanied by conches, pounded upon her delicate ear-drums.

Although it was fairly early, the place was already literally a mad-house of lust and confusion. It nauseated Zita's recently acquired sensitiveness of false decorum. She looked about for the "Black Duke" and "Hawk." The two men, seated near the door, spotted her first, Gleason being on the watch for her. Immediately he rose, and escorted her over to their table. He introduced her to O'Malley as Countess Devereaux.

Hawk ordered a drink for her. He talked awhile and then said he had a previous engagement. Shortly afterward he left Zita and the "Black Duke" alone together.

Zita took a mental inventory of the man seated across from her. He was a thin, tall man, with a mop of wavy black hair, a lock of which now dangled in his left eye. His eyes were dark and red-rimmed and a stubby growth of bluish-black whiskers showed unpleasantly on his long, thin face. His fingers curled and uncurled around his whiskey glass. They were crooked and knotted. His white linen suit was soiled and badly in need of being pressed. Zita was anxious to get the business over with. She didn't like him, nor the unholy light that gleamed from his eyes as they rested on her face and then slid down to the low "V" in her evening gown.

O'MALLEY slid his chair around the table closer to hers. He slipped his arm about the back of her chair and gently inserted his fingers beneath the strap of her evening gown. Zita's flesh crawled as his hot, clammy fingers caressed her bare skin.

"So, Countess, you collect gems?"

Zita forced her lips to smile. She looked

deep into the man's passionate dark eyes, and knew instinctively that his weaknesses were women, adventure, wine and then women again. She toyed with her wine glass and replied:

"Oui, M'sieur, I do collect ze rare jewels! And," she added, "I like dark men." She lowered her voice to a mere whisper. "Me, I understand zat you haf ze diamond for sale."

He leaned against her heavily. "A red diamond it is, Countess, and a beauty too, but I want plenty for it!"

"Perhaps," whispered Zita cautiously, "we could strike up ze bargain, you and I. Comprenez-vous?"

O'Malley's hot, pungent breath fanned her face. She wanted very much to draw away, but she steeled herself against her impulse. Instead, she raised her perfumed fingers and patted his lean, dark cheek in a maddening gesture.

"I might let it go cheaper for a little affection thrown in," O'Malley suggested to her boldly. "How about coming with me to my diggings?" He grinned repulsively, and winked at her broadly. "Not adverse to comin' to a gent's room are you, Countess?"

"Non," Zita answered him coyly, "if zat gentleman happens to be YOU!"

"Say, Countess, you know I've fallen for you in a great big way. I'll pay the bill and then we'll get out of this noisy dump." The Black Duke beckoned to the Chinese waiter and paid his bill. Half drunkenly, he threw Zita's cape about her shoulders, permitting his hand to linger on her exposed flesh much longer than was absolutely necessary.

AS THEY were leaving the "Ragoon," Zita, for the first time, realized that she had attracted the undesirable attention of a group of men, some in European clothes and turbans, others in tunics and turbans. The pushed their way toward Black Duke O'Malley and herself. One evil-looking little man, more brazen than the rest, leered toward her and said something insulting in the Gujarati tongue. The others laughed.

O'Malley, understanding, straightened to his full height; suddenly his fist shot out and struck the other on the jaw. "Got a hell of a nerve insulting a lady! Get out of our way!"

Instantly a murmur, like distant thunder, rolled about the room. It increased in momentum until it was like a roar.

"You shouldn't have done that," reprimanded Zita, as O'Malley grabbed her arm and yanked her toward the door.

"Shut up! We gotta get out of here quick, if we expect to save our hides!" Through his

half-drunken state he realized the foolhardiness of his rash act.

Suddenly there was a rush and a roar behind them! The mad horde, had been waiting for this—anything to happen, for a little excitement. The music stopped. The dancers screamed. Glass crashed against the stone flooring. Men cursed in every language. There was a concentrated shove toward the door. A foreign devil had insulted one of the faith!

O'Malley's hand was on the door, to push it open. A wiry Hindu popped up before him, a knife gleaming in his serawny brown hand. O'Malley let go of Zita to strike out at the fellow. The point of the knife slit his white coat and brought forth a trail of crimson. Primitive emotion tore the smooth veneer from Zita's reason. She kicked at the little fellow and scratched and clawed at his face as O'Malley knocked the knife from his hand. He danced about in rage just as the motley crowd shoved Zita and O'Malley through the doors and out into the streets.

RUN for it! Run like hell!" O'Malley's fingers closed around Zita's wrist like a vise of steel.

Zita raised her dress high and started to run, but out of the corner of her eye she saw one of the three beggars, there outside the cafe, rise nimbly to his feet and start in pursuit of them.

Around a corner he dragged her. A covered ghari was being driven toward them. O'Malley hauled her out before it so the frightened driver had to stop. With great strength, he hauled her up into it, Zita's gown ripping from the hem to the thigh. He shouted directions to the startled driver, who whipped up his beasts so that the cart went rattling down one street and up another. Zita tried to regain her poise. She looked behind them and saw, some little distance away, the *saddhus*, who had discarded his begging bowl and was running like a trained athlete.

O'Malley also looked around and then threw back his head and laughed. "Damn heathens, I knew they'd soon give up the chase. Just a little sport of them, but if we'd stayed it might have become serious. One guy is still following—"

"Yes," breathed Zita, her green eyes shining almost like the eyes of a cat, there in the semi-gloom of the covered cart. "He is one of the beggars who was seated outside the cafe. Do you think he was waiting for you or something?"

"Hell no!" O'Malley answered her rapidly

"Lord, Countess, but you are beautiful," he muttered hoarsely, placing his hands on her shoulders.



enough, but she detected a perceptible quiver, as of fear, saturating his deep voice.

Up one street and down another they went, more slowly now. Zita looked behind again, but the slinking shadows of their lone pursuer had melted into the surrounding gloom of the squat houses.

Finally the *ghari* stopped before a lodging house, little different from the others. O'Malley leaped down. Zita opened her purse and took out a coin. She pressed it into the driver's hand and whispered to him to wait. Evidently he understood, as she could see him nod his head by the dim light sifted through the window opposite them. The Black Duke assisted her to alight. He seemed quite sober now as he paid off the man.

O'Malley slid his arm about Zita's slim waist and directed her up the one step and into the dank, odorous corridor which was as black as the underside of a bat's wing. O'Malley struck matches when they came to a flight of steps. Zita had the feeling that she should draw back. It was hot and close in the hall, and there hovered about her an aura of evil. Physical peril seemed to lurk in every recess of the deep gloom as she continued upward, the spluttering flame of the match seeming like a will-o-the-wisp, leading her deeper and deeper into malevolent evil.

The red diamond! Perhaps it was the red diamond! Did it then bring with it a spirit of disaster?

Finally they reached the top of the steps, O'Malley led her down an upper corridor. A corridor where a door seemed to open noiselessly on oiled hinges and eyes of hate stared out and into her very soul. Her scalp prickled coldly. Her blood ran as ice through her veins. Queer, how that sensation persisted. She was a fool of course to give way to her imagination. It was ridiculous! Preposterous! She tried to laugh it off as O'Malley unlocked an unseen door.

New smells reached her nostrils. Stale wine, old tobacco odors and then a strange new one touched her senses. Incense it was, like that which was burned in temples. Temples. Red Diamonds. Heat. Everything was mixed up together like a horrible nightmare.

"Well, here we are, Countess!" O'Malley struck another match and lighted an oil lamp.

IT WAS a bare little room. Matting on the floor. An untidy bed pulled over near the window. A lounging chair. A table and an open leather suit-case. Zita shivered. The danger seemed to be closer now; like an invis-

ible but deadly web being drawn tighter and tighter. Horrible thought, that!

She sank down in the wicker chair and threw her cape from her shoulders. She felt O'Malley's burning gaze upon her and looked up suddenly, to see him gazing at her exposed leg, where it was revealed by the rip in her evening gown.

"Ah, *M'sieur* O'Malley," she purred, "may I not see ze so exquisite red diamond?"

"Hell yes, Countess, we might just as well get the business part over with first and enjoy ourselves afterward. About how much will you pay for it?"

Zita shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Zat, *mon ami*, depends upon ze size, ze color—ah a lot of zings. I cannot say without first seeing ze gem. Perhaps fifty thousand dollars; *oui*."

"You're crazy, Countess, this here gem I've got is worth at least a hundred thousand at the very cheapest." O'Malley went over to the window and lowered the slatted blinds, then he drew the curtain over the door-way which must have opened upon a tiny balcony. He knelt before his suit-case and drew forth a pair of tweezers and then a jar of shaving cream. Quickly he glanced toward the door to see if it was closed against intrusion. He unscrewed the top and then forced the tweezers down into the creamy substance. From it, he drew an object from the cream, with a piece of soft material. Then, he rose to his feet and advanced toward her. A red, glittering object in the palm of his shaking hand.

"There, Countess, is the red diamond!"

Zita looked at it and then touched it with her lovely fingers. The gem was as large—well, as large as a human eye. Sold to the right person it would surely bring a king's ransom! Even as it sparkled and scintillated there before her, it seemed to emit a sense of evil that was very close. She wanted to grab the gem and run as she had never run before, but instead—she had to wait. Do the thing slowly—carefully.

"Eet ees indeed ze genuine red diamond. Only once before haf I seen one of zem, but ze Prince, alas, he would not part wif eet at any price. *M'sieur*, I weel gif one hundred thousand dollars for ze gem. She ees indeed worth eet!" Zita smiled within herself as she remembered the pitiful little money she actually possessed. "Tomorrow," she continued, "I weel take from ze vault ze money and come here at high noon. Weel you, at zat time, sell eet to me for zat amount!"

How ludicrously funny! O'Malley's eyes were big and shining and staring. He was probably already planning what he would do

with the money she was going to pay him for the gem. What fools men were! She could laugh forever at the way he was shaking in anticipation of that thing which he would never receive.

"SOLD!" He told her. "Countess, you're getting a bargain!" He turned to get the jar to cram the diamond back into its greasy bed. Zita reached down cautiously for the little gem she had hidden away, but O'Malley turned back to her too quickly, so instead she pulled down her gown.

The Black Duke forced the red diamond into the jar and screwed on the top. He dropped the whole carelessly into his opened suitcase.

"Ah, *M'sieur*," cooed Zita, "you are so clever. Who would ever zink of looking in zat place for ze diamond. By ze way, just where did you procure eet? From a temple perhaps?"

Black Duke O'Malley straightened up as though he had been shot. He glared at her. "Shut up, you fool!" he glanced nervously toward the window. "Say," as a thought struck him, "maybe you act as a spy! Good Lord, I never thought of that!"

"*Mon Dieu*," smiled Zita disarmingly, "you should know better *zau* zat!"

O'Malley's expression changed again. His burning eyes seem to literally strip the dress from her body. He advanced toward her, his face bathed in sweat as wild desires made of it an almost repellent mask.

"Lord, Countess, but you're beautiful," he muttered hoarsely. He placed his hands on her shoulders.

Zita looked up into his eyes, as an inviting smile crept over her face. "Do you zink so, *mon cher*?"

"Baby, you can have that diamond for seventy-five thousand if only you'll—"

Zita rose to her feet as his hands still clung to the straps of her evening gown. The action lowered them so that her lovely bare shoulders were exposed to his feverish gaze. With a quick motion he swept her into his arms and pressed her close against him, as his hot lips rested on her tempting, crimson mouth and then slid down her throat.

Zita pushed against his chest. He looked at her and followed her gaze toward the bed.

"Of course, Countess, that would be more comfortable. Just a minute and I'll fix it." He released her and turned toward the bed.

IN THAT instant, Zita swooped downward and yanked her automatic out of her leg holster. Her green eyes became as hard as marbles. Her nostrils dilated. Her mouth became a firm, stern line.

"Reach for the ceiling, big boy!" she commanded O'Malley in a deadly voice.

He whirled about quickly. Anger mingled with consternation covered his dark face. "Damnation, I might have known. Taken in by a skirt, by God!"

"Do as I told you or I'll drill you!"

O'Malley did as she told him. Like lightning, still keeping him covered she stooped and picked up the jar of shaving cream with her left hand. With her little finger she caught up her silver wrap and then backed hastily toward the door. She tucked the jar under her arm after she had thrown the cape over her left shoulder. With a quick motion she opened the door and backed out into the enfolding gloom of the upper corridor.

"You damn little hell-cat!" shouted O'Malley. "I'll get you for this!"

With the nose of the automatic poked through the door, Zita gradually closed it. Suddenly, rising up behind O'Malley, she saw a white turban which parted the curtain, that covered the balcony doorway. She opened her mouth to scream but no sound issued forth! For a brief second she saw the gleam of a flashing knife. It left brown fingers and she knew from O'Malley's cry of anguish it had been buried in his back. In silent fascination Zita saw the Black Duke pitch forward on his face. Seared into her brain forever was the vision of the knife protruding from his back and the ever widening spot of crimson which was rapidly staining his white coat. A moment more she watched as it trickled onto the matting.

Suddenly, into her line of vision, leaped the beggar whom she recognized as having been the one who had followed them from the cafe. Behind him came a priest from the temple of Kali! The theft of the red diamond was being avenged!

Zita waited to see no more. Her own physical danger came upon her with full realization. She raced lightly down the hall until she found the steps down which she sped to the street below. Several yards away the faithful *ghari* driver was waiting—fast asleep.

CHAPTER III

A HALF-HOUR later she came up the steps of her own lodging house. "Hawk!" Gleason opened the door of her room for her.

"Get it!" he demanded of her.

Zita nodded and entered the door. Old Marjia was fast asleep in a chair, with his polished box of tools on the floor beside him.

Zita saw that Gleason's eyes glowed with ill-

concealed greed. He rubbed his palms together and wet his avid lips eagerly with a brandy-perfumed tongue. "I was sure you would turn the trick. I saw Mrs. Leland again. She's coming here at ten tomorrow morning."

Zita threw her cloak on the bed and then unscrewed the lid from the shaving cream jar. As she looked down into its white, greasy surface, she mentally saw O'Malley stretched on the floor of his room, the dagger in his back! She shut her eyes and opened them again to pull forth from the container THE RED DIAMOND!

Gleason began trembling, when she had wiped it clean. He took it to the light and examined it. "By Godfrey, Zita, it's a red diamond all right. Hey, Malarja. Malarja! Wake up, you old sun of a gun, and get to work!"

The old jewel cutter stirred in his chair and opened his sharp eyes behind their spectacles. He pulled his beard and looked about him as remembrance returned.

"Go work in your own room, Hawk," directed Zita. "I've done your dirty work for you and now I want some sleep. The rest of the trick is up to you!"

Zita was glad when Hawk had left with the stone and the old jewel-cutter. She slipped out of her clothes, pulled her bed nearer the window and flung herself upon it. Her dreams were filled with visions of O'Malley, and a *dastur* who advanced menacingly toward her with a dagger, in the hilt of which was set a huge, red diamond.

FINALLY, as daylight filtered in through her blinds, Zita awakened. She yawned luxuriously and stretched wide her graceful, bare arms. She became conscious of someone tapping on her door. Quickly she drew her white silken robe about her firm, rounded body and padded to the door.

"Who ees eet?"

"Hawk," came back Gleason's voice, "open up for me."

Zita let him in. He dragged her over to the window where he opened his hands. In both, he held the red diamond.

"Which one is the real gem?" he demanded of Zita.

She opened her eyes wider and gazed at the two stones. "I—I don't know," she finally admitted.

"That's all I wanted to know," Gleason straightened up. "The real diamond is in my right hand. Old Malarja just left. He's been working all night. I gave him every bloomin' cent I had. I'm betting everything on old Le-

land coming across with the cabbage. What are you going to do now?"

"Sleep some more," Zita lied to him, while she watched him narrowly out of the slits of her lowered lids. "You attend to everything, and then give me half of what she pays you. I trust you implicitly, Hawk, you know that."

"Yes," he answered her absently; "yes, of course."

Presently, he left her room. Zita immediately snapped into action. She dressed herself in a traveling suit and packed everything else in her bags and trunk. She ate a bit of breakfast and then quietly stole out of the lodging house to a place where she telephoned to the steamship company and ordered reservations on the first boat leaving Bombay. There would



For a brief second she saw the gleam of a flashing knife. It found lodgment in the Black Duke's back, then he fell forward.

be a lot of things to see about. Papers, passport and other small business. It was ten o'clock when she returned to her room. She listened intensely and was quite sure she could hear the rise and fall of a man's and woman's voice in Hawk's room. Mrs. Leland must have kept her word!

Zita smiled a secret smile as she went over to the black-wood table and picked up a bottle of choice brandy for which she had spent almost her last cent. A toast to their success it



would be! Then her fingers closed over a tiny phial of colorless stuff she held in her scented palm.

A DOOR closed. Steps descended the stairs. Silence, during which the hum of the city seeped into her room. Time during which she became acutely aware of the smells of Bombay and hated them. Soon—very soon now, she would be looking out over Lake Como with Luigi, he who came of real royal blood! Zita smiled and knew it was time to see Hawk. She picked up the bottle and left the room.

"Hawk," she called as she knocked on Gleason's door, "it's Zita."

He opened the door for her. "My dear, it worked! I'm packing already. We haven't any time to lose. I want you to see about buying our passage on ship board."

"How much did she pay you?" Zita inquired as she entered and closed the door behind her, sitting the brandy on Hawk's table.

"Fifty thousand American dollars!" he told her triumphantly.

Hawk took up a small tin box and opened it. He counted it out to Zita. "And here," he finished, "is your half. In addition, Zita, I think you should have the red diamond. As you said, you did all the dirty work and you deserve it."

"Why, Hawk," murmured Zita in surprise, "I never expected that you'd—"

"Sure, honey, you thought I was a piker, eh? Put away the pretty and then get busy!"

"I've brought a bottle of brandy to celebrate our success," Zita indicated it.

"We haven't time for that," refused Hawk. "Uncork it, we'll have time to drink to our success."

"All right," Hawk closed the box and pulled out the cork. He brought two glasses and poured the stuff into it.

"My heavens, Hawk," cried Zita, "what's that?" She stared at the window there behind Hawk.

He wheeled about quickly and in that instant the colorless liquid was dashed into Hawk's glass.

"You're crazy," he turned back to her, "there's nothing at the window. What you goin' to do; develop nerves?"

"Hawk, I thought I saw the top of a man's head."

Hawk picked up his glass and walked toward the window. There was nothing to be seen, of course. "Forget it," he admonished her. "here's to our continued success!"

Their glasses clinked and then they both drank. Hawk smacked his lips and poured himself out another glassful. "More!" he inquired of Zita.

"No, I'm going now; see you later."

Zita only went as far as her own room. For a half-hour she stared unseeingly out of her window to the road beyond. Then, there was the dull thud, in the next room, as of a body falling. Zita immediately leaped into action. She rushed to Gleason's door and opened it. Hawk was lying on the floor, his eyes closed. He'd probably sleep for many hours, after hav-

(Continued on page 67)

The Sorceress of Vincennes

by

EDWARD GREEN

*A tale of Kayla---
the lovely spy whose
vagaries and inconsistencies,
whose loves
and intrigues upset
the staid routine of
the armies of France*

It was gay but tragic. Ghostly and soul-searing, but throughout it all ran the thin skein of love which prevented humanity from becoming a raving mass of lunatics, purchased, pilfered love, but a magnificent outlet for the pent-up emotions of war-crazed souls.

Dick looked toward the entrance and suddenly stiffened. An unescorted girl, wrapped in an ermine throw, was coming toward his table.

The young American watched. His eyes took in every line of her graceful figure. His pulse

beat faster and for the first time in his life Dick became intensely interested in a woman.

HE GROUND his cigarette out as the girl stopped at the table opposite him. She stood erect and regal while the waiter drew her chair out. Before seating herself, she glanced about the room and for a fleeting second her eyes rested on Dick. He thought she smiled. His blood raced through his veins.

He wondered who she could be. His eyes brightened as he watched her sleek black satin dress close to her thighs. The rich fabric hugged the luscious curves as though they were one. Fascinated, Dick's eyes followed every move of the dainty white hands as they passed over those clean, lithe members.

Without knowing why, Dick looked down to where the shaded light of the ceiling cast intriguing shadows on an alluring limb, tastefully sheathed in sheer cob-webby silken hose. He noted the tiny satin pump with the ridiculously high heel that seemed to accentuate the graceful arch of the dainty foot. The silken hose seemed to be molded to the lovely trim ankle.

"By God!" he gasped. "She's wonderful."

Screened by the fern on his table, he looked at her face. There was not a sign of rouge or powder and her dark, exotic beauty cast a spell over him as he noted her large, dark eyes held an expression of soft wonderment. They glowed like fire and he was entranced.

They were devastating, he mused, and so was her finely chiseled nose set above rosebud lips that invited kisses.

The girl lifted her hand and



DICK FARREL, the young American, liked war-time Paris. He thrilled to the care-free gaiety of the cafes and the taste of good wine. As assistant designer for the Spanier Aircraft Works he enjoyed a large salary and much free time. He spent both seeking the greatest thrill of all—the soft caress of an alluring woman.

True, there were cocottes, pretty and sensual, also a fair sprinkling of smartly gowned sophisticates but they all lacked that vital "something" which would send his blood coursing like liquid fire. Their smiles were hollow masks that hid avaricious hearts.

Dick wanted none of these; they were not his style. He looked on them as harpies feeding on the shattered, love-starved souls of the men who had been through hell. Still, he reflected, better a purchased love than none at all when one was quite apt to meet the Grim Reaper without warning, or knowing what love meant.

He sat at a table in the Cafe Brille and permitted his gaze to wander. The usual crowds were going through the usual stereotyped routine. Sensual girls, clad in the thinnest of silken gowns, clinging to the steel-lashed men from the battle lines. They would dance awhile, drink much wine and then drift away to spend the night, perhaps the last on this earth, in love.

Dick smiled at the naviette exhibited by the girls and the gullibility of the men. Anyone could see the girls were on the make. Good luck to them, he thought. Aviation, infantry and artillery officers accepted their caresses, took what the gods allowed and laughed. At other tables, red tabs and gold braids from staff positions, entertained Patou-gowned Loreleis, smiled benevolently at their clever sallies and later sneaked away to exclusive hotels; perhaps their first step toward a firing squad.

passed it over her hair. Dick started when he saw that hair; it was her crowning glory; a rich, jet-black mass of rioting curls not too elegantly coiffured.

"I wonder who the devil she is," Dick thought to himself. "I'll never rest until I find out."

She had gotten into his blood. His senses multiplied rapidly and an overpowering desire gripped him. He must know her at once.

He called a waiter and folding a fifty franc note crinkled it carelessly.

"Garçon, donnez vous—oh hell," he laughed. He crinkled the note again.

"Get me an introduction to that woman," he whispered, indicating by a nod the girl at the table, "and this is yours."

"Certainment." The waiter smiled and darted away.

THE waiter crossed to the table and spoke to the girl. Her eyes lifted and she glanced at Dick. Her face broke into a fascinating smile and she nodded to the young American. Like a man walking on air he crossed to her table and seated himself.

The girl's luminous eyes rested on him a moment and she lighted a cigarette. She tossed the match down with a quick movement and then spoke, slowly, huskily and with an intriguing foreign accent.

"You wished to speak with me?"

It was a question more than a statement and Dick thrilled to the rich, vibrant voice. A tingle raced down his spine and he managed to gasp:

"Yes, I wished to meet you," and then he was stuck for words.

The girl laughed, a delicious musical laugh. "One should be careful whom one wishes to meet in war-time Paris, no."

"No," Dick shot out positively. "Not when one has waited so long to meet one like you."

She laughed at the compliment. Dick's hand stole across the white cloth and closed on hers. He was about to speak when the waiter coughed discreetly.

"Pardonnez moi, but messieur, the fifty francs."

Dick laughed recklessly, deliriously. He tossed the note to the waiter and ordered more wine. He turned to the girl.

"My name is Dick Farrel," he offered. "I am an American."

The girl blew a puff of smoke into the air. Her languorous eyes clouded. Her lashes seemed to droop.

"I am known as Kayla Cheroff. I am a Russian—and a refugee," she ended, simply.

"Have you no friends in Paris?"

"Very few. They were all killed."

"How did you escape?"

The girl crushed her cigarette out. She turned the full power of her lustrous eyes on Dick. He was enthralled. He heard her voice as if in a dream.

"Even a Bolshevik can betray his trust if an attractive woman will favor him."

Dick woke with a jolt. He couldn't believe his ears. This gorgeous creature was practically telling him she had given her love to a Bolshevik to escape the revolution. The words crashed into his brain like a bullet. His tone changed as he said:

"Were you forced to submit to the attentions of those beasts in order to get away?"

"I said if an attractive woman will favor them, didn't I?" she challenged.

"Yes."

"Well, in war time, certain things don't always materialize, a woman's promised favors, for instance."

Dick breathed easier. For the moment he thought this lovely creature was a practiced demi-monde but her explanation put him at ease.

"Shall we dance?" he suggested.

Kayla nodded.

THEY drifted on the dance floor to the strains of a dreamy waltz. As he held her supple body in his arms a surge of emotion swept through Dick. His nostrils dilated. The delicate perfume which seemed part of her intoxicated him. She was warm, vibrant, young. Her body quivered as she clung to him, her face temptingly close. Dick buried his fevered cheeks in her scented hair and kissed a tiny ear.

Evening passed into night and night faded into dawn; the dawn of a new day filled with glorious promise for Dick. Never had he known such thrills. He yearned for more.

"It's four o'clock," he whispered, "come, let us get out of here."

She acceded with a happy smile and they entered a decrepit taxi. Twenty minutes later found them before a handsome block of expensive flats. Dick glanced at the building. He wondered if he dared—

"Live alone?" he inquired.

"Perhaps; why?"

"May I come in?"

Kayla's thick lashes drooped across her dark eyes. She laughed, became animated and answered:

"Of course, silly boy. Did you think I would let you go away without—" her voice faded provocatively.

"Without what?" Dick prompted, his arms about her.

She laughed, and brushed his lips.

"Guess," she said, and raced up the stairs, Dick at her clinking heels.

CHAPTER II

DICK sat on a luxurious divan, his eyes fixed on a pile of frilly finery. His mind ran riot as he reached out and touched a sheer chiffon stocking. His pulse beat faster as a faint trace of intriguing perfume was wafted to his nostrils. He could hear the musical voice of Kayla singing a Russian love song. It was a song of passion, fire, a burning love and it inflamed him, as she meant that it should.

His glance roamed toward the sound and her boudoir. Other pieces of pretty clothing were tossed carelessly on the bed. He craned his neck still further until he beheld her reflection in her long, oval mirror. She stood half revealed in a becoming negligee, full breasted, lithe and altogether desirable. He watched avidly as she sprayed herself with perfume.

Dick buried his hot face in his hands. He had not expected to be invited to her apartment so soon. He did not know how to accept the situation. He had thought her—well, different. In a flash it struck him that perhaps she was—lonely. Like himself, perhaps she too wished a companion different from the common run. In him she had found one. He was conscious of an almost overwhelming desire consuming his body. He was blind with passion.

"Tired?"

Dick straightened up and gasped. Her beauty took his breath. She knew the art of subtle display, so much and no more. She knew undraped flesh did not possess half the lure of concealed mysteries. Her shapely limbs were partly revealed through folds of clinging silk as she stood, breath-taking, alluring and tantalizing. He surveyed the lovely lines of her lissom body. He reached for her. She eluded his feverish fingers.

"Kayla," he said, hoarsely; "come here. I want you so."

"Not just now, Dicky dear," she laughed, invitingly, and seated herself at the other end of the divan.

"Kayla, you're beautiful, marvelous, divine."

Her dark eyes kindled. Their warm glow burst into passionate flame. She beckoned and he stole closer to her.

Dick's flaming eyes took in the sensual allure of her frothy negligee. She thrust a shapely limb into his view. Her slender hand smoothed and caressed the silk stocking. Her haunting perfume permeated his nostrils. It sent his blood racing at fever heat. He reached and crushed her in his arms, smothering her lovely face with burning, passionate kisses.

"Kayla."

"Dicky."

"You're driving me mad."

She relaxed on the divan. She lay back and her arms encircled his neck. She drew him close to her.

The contact with her warm, soft body sent him into a wild ecstasy. His hands sought the fastenings of her negligee. She kissed him passionately and then suddenly thrust him from her.

"No, Dicky," she almost whispered. "Please. Soon, perhaps. Kiss me."

Dick was like a man demented. He panted with suppressed desire and crushed her to his breast.

"Why?" he croaked.

"Because, darling, I want you here—always—not for just this time—always."

Dick stared. His mouth was dry, parched. He rose unsteadily to his feet. He poured a drink.

"Do you mean—?"

Her eyes glowed luminously and she lowered her lashes.

"By heavens, Kayla!" Dick exclaimed, "you want me?"

She nodded. Her hand smoothed the silk on her half revealed thigh.

Dick flung the glass to the floor. He leaped to her side. His fevered hands reached and his hot lips smothered her with kisses. She submitted to his impassioned embrace and gave him kiss for kiss.

He moved. She drew him to her. His arms tightened like steel bands about her soft pulsing body. He could feel her heart pounding madly. Her flesh quivered. She pressed close to him. Their lips met and fire coursed through them as they lay locked in a long abandoned kiss.

He released her, panting. His eyes were wild and she smiled invitingly. His hands shot out again and caressed her arm, warm breasts. Suddenly he seized her, bent her backward. He felt her soft thighs close to his body.

"God!" he gasped, "Kyla, this can't last."

Suddenly she thrust him from her. He rose panting and disheveled.

"Dicky," she sobbed, "don't let me."

Dick shook himself. He felt ashamed. The sight of her tears caused him to take her hands. His passion fled.

"Why, dear?" he asked, softly.

"Because I want it to be when we are together for always."

Dick paused a moment. Kayla composed herself. She lighted a cigarette.

"It is better," she said, huskily. "I have never given myself to any man. You will be—the first, but I'm afraid, Dicky, afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"You may tire of me. I am extravagant. It will cost money, much money, to—own me."

"I'm not poor," he shot out, and then stopped. He thought of his salary, of what he had saved. He looked around the luxurious apartment and realized his monthly stipend wouldn't pay even the rent. His face colored.

"Have you enough money to keep me well, Dicky?" Kayla whispered, her lips lusciously pursed.

His pulse beat madly. Kayla had gotten into his blood. Her nearness; her allure ensnared him. He almost forgot his resolve to respect her plea for him to wait.

Restraining himself, he told her of his work; his salary. She shook her head.

"It could not keep me well dressed, Dicky dear. Am I not worth more than that?"

"God, yes," he said, breathlessly. "You're worth anything. I'd do anything to have you for myself."

"You would have me too, Dicky, all for yourself," Kayla said, softly.

Dick looked at her as she sat with lowered head. He took a step forward and stopped.

"There are many who would pay, if I wished it so, Dicky," Kayla prompted.

His eyes widened in horror at the thought of anyone else touching her lovely form.

"No, no," he said, hurriedly, "there must be some way for me to get money."

"There is, Dicky dear," Kayla breathed into his ear. "An easy way."

"What is it?"

She smiled archly. Her brows lifted and she kissed him passionately. Instantly he was aflame again.

YOU are an American," he heard her whisper. "Your country is not at war. Why do you not sell some of those silly airplane plans? It would do no harm. There are many agents here who would pay much money for

them. Enough to let us live together, you and I," she ended, and kissed him again.

Dick's brow knitted. She was proposing treason. It didn't sound like treason, coming from her, but—

Her slender white arms were about his shoulders. The scent of her hair ravaged his brain. He held her tightly. He must have her.

"Who would buy plans, darling?" he faltered.

"There are many," Kayla replied. "Sooner or later they will steal them, or shoot down our airplane. You must get them first. They are worth money now, much money. When you have them, you have me, Dicky."

Her luscious lips curved and she pressed them to his. She clung tightly to him and her hips moved, ever so slightly.

It was enough. Dick trembled. He crushed her to him. He felt the insistent call of her body. It was maddening. He smothered her face with hot kisses. His hands probed the fastenings of her negligee. He felt the sense-shattering warmth of the soft flesh.

FOR ten minutes he held her thus. It was heaven, but it was also hell. He tore himself away. He would move heaven and hell to possess her, body and soul. What were the plans of a few airplanes compared to the satisfying of his burning desire to own and love a girl like Kayla Cherroff? He resolved to steal the trainings of the latest fighting plane, the S. V. 7, supreme of all fighting planes.

Unstrung by the tremendous emotional excitement, Dick seized his hat, kissed Kayla and rushed from the apartment. As the door slammed behind him a queer smile stole over the beautiful face of the exotic Kayla.

CHAPTER III

KAYLA sang a lilting tune as he sat and splashed in her bath. The ringing of her doorbell shattered her musings. She leaped from the bath, rubbed her lovely body with a soft towel, tossed a dainty negligee over her shoulders and opened the door.

Derek Doring, dark, saturnine and handsome, smiled a greeting. Kayla's face clouded. A flame flickered in her dark eyes. She watched him walk nonchalantly across the room and toss his hat on the divan.

"Well," he said, lighting a cigarette and looking intently at Kayla.

"Very," she snapped, "and you?"

"Not bad," he laughed unperturbed by the cold reception. "I'm here for my cut."

Fire blazed in Kayla's eyes. They were no longer soft or alluring. They resembled the eyes of a female tiger defending her young. Despite this, her voice was icily polite as she drawled:

"May I ask what you call 'your cut'?"

Doring laughed, a cool, sardonic laugh.

"You may. I know how you lured Richard Farrel, a designer of the Spanlier Aircraft Works into meeting you at the Cafe Brille. I also know he came here with you later."

Kayla's lip curled.

"You know too much."

"Yes," Doring laughed easily, "I also know

"One should be careful whom one wishes to meet in wartime Paris, no?" she murmured.



what you're after and I know who you're going to sell them to. Now, do I get a cut, or—?"

Kayla almost snarled. Her slender fingers clenched and flexed as though seeking Doring's fleshy throat.

"Keep your hands out of this, snake," she hissed. "It is my game, so keep out of it or I will have you garroted with your own scarf."

Doring retained his composure. In his long

and spotty career as a free agent, selling information to all the great powers he had gained much practice in remaining calm under all conditions. He carelessly flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"If I were you," he said, meaningly, ignoring her threat, "I would be inclined to consider the proposition offered you."

Kayla's eyes blazed. She knew his proposal by heart. He wished her to be his mistress and work with him. Her lips curled in scorn as she answered.

"Yesterday I might have considered it, today, it is different. There are times I could kill you, Derek, other times I like you. This is not one of those times."

Doring smiled. This woman filled him with a thousand desires. No other woman could stir his cold blood like Kayla. Many times he had almost had her yielding to his desires, but she always seemed to elude him. This inflamed and egged him on. He would stop at nothing, not even murder, to possess her.

He rose to his feet. He walked slowly toward her. His hand touched her arm. It traveled to her breast. She made no move.

"You provoking devil," he said, through tight lips.

Kayla reached up and pinched his chin.

"Now, Derek," she said chidingly, "run along and play with your one-night stands. I've found a man who—"

She stopped, and clutched at her throat. Doring, instantly alert, shot a question.

"You've fallen for this Farrel, haven't you?"

Kayla's face changed color. She hid her confusion with a smile. Doring's small eyes were fastened on her; boring and accusing.

"No, Derek," she jerked out, "I—I'm tired of the game. He is amusing, that's all."

Doring wasn't convinced, still, he could do nothing about it. It would not him nothing to discuss the matter any further. He changed his tone.

"Kayla," he said, looking cautiously about him. "There is something big going to break soon. There's an offer of a half a million francs for the plans of the S. V. 7, a Spanlier ship. Are you interested?"

Kayla's dark eyes glittered momentarily. She stifled a polite yawn.

"Possibly," she drawled, "but I'll be busy

tonight, and that, by the way, is a hint that I don't wish to be disturbed."

"Yes, tonight," Kayla repeated.

Doring rose. His face was inscrutable as he took his hat and made his departure. As the door closed behind him, Kayla's face softened. She didn't hear Doring mutter to himself: "So, she's going to be busy tonight. I think I know who she'll be busy with and I know what he's paying for the privilege, if it is a privilege at the price."

THE evening sun had set over Paris and searchlights were sweeping the sky for enemy aircraft when Dick entered Kayla's apartment. Through the day he had debated with himself the stealing of the plans, but as the shadows closed around him, the spell of Kayla held him tight.

"Dicky," she trilled, and threw her arms about him.

His misgivings fled. His hands trembled. Her nearness intoxicated him. He gave her a thin package of papers.

"Here they are," he said, huskily. "Put them away, and hurry."

Her lips brushed his. Again, her heady perfume unsettled him. His face flushed. He was drunk with passion. She pressed her blossom body close to his and then darted away. He heard a drawer open, then close. A moment later she stood before him.

Dick's feverish eyes feasted on her slim body. It was alluring, devastating. The filmy negligee revealed the delicate curves of her breast, her hips. Artfully, she caused the silken mesh to slip aside. Her shapely limbs were exposed for a fleeting second. Dick could wait no longer. He was enraptured. He drew her close.

His lips met hers in a burning kiss. His blood coursed through his veins, pounding madly. They moved slowly back toward the divan. He bent her over. She sank gracefully, invitingly to the soft cushions. The contact with her lovely body sent electric vibrations through him.

"God," he mumbled, half insane with desire, "there's only one night like this in a man's life."

"And a woman's too," Kayla whispered, opening her arms and drawing him close.

For fully three minutes Dick lay there. Her soft warmth stole through his clothing. The room swirled in a crazy dream as his brain refused to register anything but a soul-fluttering ecstasy. Kayla's lips burned. She clutched him tight. Her luscious limbs trembled beneath him.

Like the crack of a gun a voice snapped through the room.

"That'll do."

At the sound of the voice, Dick whirled. Kayla leaped to her feet and saw a short, evil-looking man with a leering smile on his face. He held a huge automatic in his hairy paw. Just behind him, a thin, sinister face poked over his shoulder and sneered.

"Verree nice, verree nice."

"What do you want?" Kayla snapped, blazing with anger.

The thin man smiled. He stepped to the side.

"You know what we want," he jeered. "I did want them when I came here, but after seeing you, perhaps I shall change my mind—and take both," he ended, meaningly.

His beady eyes played on Kayla's alluring body. His sharp nose twitched. The short man bared his teeth. Kayla's lips curled in scorn.

"You filth of the gutter," she hissed. "Why are you here?"

The thin man suddenly barked.

"Where are those tracings?"

Kayla clutched her throat. Dick paled. His mouth dried.

Kayla's dark eyes blazed again. Her voice cut like a knife.

"They are in this drawer. Take them—and get out."

The thin man leaped to the drawer, jerked it open and took the package of tracings. He thrust them in his pocket and stepped across to Kayla. His mean face lighted and his hands touched her white body. Like the strike of a cat, Kayla's slim hand struck the leering face. "Scum," she snarled, her voice filled with hate.

The thin man rubbed his face. He looked at Dick who was held under the menace of the gun.

"When I have disposed of these tracings," he jeered, "I'll be back—and I'll be more fortunate than your friend here."

Kayla didn't hear him. She was dressing. She cast a glance of pity at Dick.

"Hurry and dress, Dicky dear," she said, softly.

The door slammed behind the marauders as the Kayla finished speaking. Dick, his passion gone, was trembling. A look of fear crossed his handsome face.

"Kayla," he said, hoarsely, "I've taken the plans—for nothing. They are gone. I am a traitor. I've lost you."

He buried his face in his hands.

Kayla stroked his hair. A strange light was in her eyes.

"Come, Dicky, there is no time to lose. We must hurry. You have lost nothing—not even me. We will go and when we come back, we will not be disturbed again; I promise you."

Dick leaped to his feet. The wild, disheveled look left his face.

"Why, Kayla! What can we do?"

"Get those plans," she said, crisply, "or at least, save you."

"Do you know who——" he began.

"Hurry," Kayla beseeched him. "Of course I know. Doring sent those swine here."

KAYLA reached the street with Dick at her heels. She called a taxi and a moment later turned to Dick.

"You had better go home for a little time," she said, brushing his lips. "I will get Doring at his flat and make him give me those plans. Don't be afraid, I'll get them back, or else——"

Dick was sickened. What a fool he had been. An alluring woman had made him a traitor. Still, it had been for a price—but the price had not been paid. He looked at Kayla and his pulse quickened. She smiled and lowered her eyelashes. Dick forgot his visions of a firing squad; forgot everything but Kayla. When she let him off at his flat she kissed and whispered she would call for him later. Like a man in a dream, Dick walked away.

CHAPTER IV

DORING, immaculate in evening dress, paced the carpeted floor of his apartment. There was a peculiar smile on his sallow face. He was very pleased with the success of his coup. For a paltry five hundred francs he had hired the two thugs to obtain the coveted plans. He could sell them for many times that amount. He had made inquiries and assured himself of this, but he had another price. He wanted Kayla.

He lighted a straw-tipped Boguslavsky and seated himself on a luxurious divan. Though a master in the art of cross-double-cross he knew Kayla was his match. If she would bargain with him he would——

The door bell rang stridently. Doring leaped to his feet. Who could be calling on him at this hour? He flung the door open and Kayla blazed into the room. Half surprised, yet amused, Doring followed.

"To what do I owe——" he began.

Kayla cut him short.

"You know why I'm here," she snapped. "Save your breath and name your price."

Doring's eyebrows raised.

"You flatter me, my dear."

"Your price," Kayla persisted.

Doring smiled. He flicked the ash from his cigarette and spoke softly.

"You wish to know my price?"

"Yes."

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes, and I'm going to have you—tonight."

Kayla's lovely lip curled in distaste.

"So you say, but I think not. Derek, you are playing a dangerous game. You have neither the intellect nor the nerve to carry it through."

"You have, I presume."

Kayla flared. Her dark eyes flashed fire.

"Come, we are wasting time. You have the tracings?"

"Who else?"

Kayla seated herself and tossed a shapely calf over her knee. Doring's eyes lighted at the sight of the dainty limb. He leaned forward.

"If you will give me your promise to work with me I will give you those tracings at once. I want you, Kayla. You and I would work well together."

Kayla rose to her feet. Her voice was brittle as she spoke.

"Derek, I've offered you your chance. If the Surete suspect those tracings are here—you will never get the chance to see Paris in springtime."

Doring laughed.

"You paint a lovely picture."

"I do," Kayla retorted, "and you are in the center of it."

"That is very nice."

"Not so nice; you have a bandage around your eyes and your hands are tied. Now, do I get those tracings?"

"You know my price."

Kayla moved toward the door. Doring opened it for her.

"Think it over, Kayla," he said smoothly, bowing her out. "I'll risk even that picture—for you."

"You'll do all of that and—won't get me."

AT THAT instant, two dapper, yet efficient looking men suddenly appeared before the doorway. One of them whipped a gun from his pocket.

"Get back in that room," he snapped.

Doring paled and turned to Kayla who was regarding him with an amused smile.

"No, Derek," she answered his unspoken question, "these men have nothing to do with me."

"I am Inspector Duquesne, from the Sur-

etc., the taller of the two men offered. "This is my assistant, Pierre Froise."

Kayla slowly retraced her steps into the room.

"You have credentials, of course," she said, icily.

The Inspector produced a tiny badge.

Not for a moment did Kayla lose her composure. She noted the admiring glances of the two men.

"Very interesting," she said, sweetly, "but what has this to do with me?"

The Inspector sighed. It was going to be hard to argue with a so elegant mademoiselle. There were times in his career when he wished he had been a sewer cleaner, but then, he would never have met such charming ladies.

"A thousand pardons," he offered, "but I am merely here to search for certain things. Of course I must take you back to the Surete with me where you will be searched by a woman."

Kayla laughed. She looked at Doring. Cold sweat was pouring down his face. His hands were moist. His stomach swirled in a dumb sickening motion.

"You seem upset, Derek," she laughed gaily.

The assistant commenced a methodical search. Doring watched him with glazing eyes. He looked beseechingly at Kayla. His eyes flashed a message. She caught it. As though bored with the whole proceeding she walked slowly toward the window.

At the window, she stood as though regarding the busy street below. Instead, her sharp eyes were searching the mass of flowers in the window box. She saw an atom of white. As though weary she turned her back to the window. Her slender fingers probed the flower box.

The Inspector was watching her keenly. She stifled a polite yawn. Her fingers closed over the paper package.

"Mademoiselle likes the fresh air, perhaps," the Inspector said meaningly.

"Very much," Kayla replied.

"I regret you must step away from that window," the Inspector said.

Kayla's tiny foot caught the edge of her trailing gown. The shoulder strap broke. The gown slipped to the floor revealing her fresh loveliness alluringly hidden by a sheer silk chemise. The Inspector gasped. He turned his head. Kayla's hands darted like lightning and the package disappeared in the mysteries of her undergarments.

When the Inspector turned again, Kayla was her usual self. She smiled and the In-

spector blushed. He came to her side.

Doring had seen it all. He had seen Kayla secrete the package of tracings in her gown. He knew he was safe.

The assistant conducted a most thorough search, but of course, found nothing. He turned to Doring.

"Get into that room," he barked, signaling toward the bedroom.

Doring swaggered insolently into his room. He cast a sly wink at Kayla over his shoulder.

AS THE door closed behind Doring, Kayla seated herself on the divan and thrust a lovely limb before her. She regarded it tentatively. The Inspector regarded it speculatively. Kayla spoke.



"Perhaps," she said, "you will be kind enough to tell me just what you are looking for?"

The Inspector seemed flustered. Like all Frenchmen he was very gallant and romantic where good-looking women were concerned.

"Ah," he half whispered, "certain plans are missing. We have learned this man, Doring, has been seeking information as to where he could sell them. Perhaps it is merely a rumor, but we must investigate."

"Of course," Kayla laughed, and the Inspector's blood ran faster.

Suddenly she became animated. She moved quickly. She seized the lapels of the Inspector's coat.

"Is it possible," she spoke huskily, "that this Doring is a—spy?"

The Inspector shrugged.

"One never knows. We must suspect everyone—even you."

Kayla was too well trained to even simulate surprise. She knew the tricks of the trade by heart and wondered what the Inspector would have thought had he known he was within six inches of the stolen plans. The thought almost caused her to laugh.

"Perhaps," she said, softly, "you would like to search me."

The Inspector threw up his hands. His face registered surprise and then mock horror.

"Who wouldn't?" he mumbled, and then his voice grew hard. He had unpleasant business to perform.

"You must accompany me," he said. "I regret it deeply, but you must come."

The door of Doring's bedroom flew open. Doring emerged, a triumphant leer on his face. His beady eyes glittered as he looked at Kayla.

"The stupid fools have found nothing," he sneered. "This man offered me fifty thousand francs if I would tell him where the plans are. As if I knew—"

Doring's eyes glittered as he spoke. They were filled with a cold menace. Kayla didn't miss it.

"Well," she replied innocently, "fifty thousand francs is a lot of money, Derek."

"It is not as much as something I would like," he said meaningly.

Kayla's delicate chin set firm. She knew what Doring was leading up to. She saw his eyes fasten on her form and seemed to feel them probe her very soul.

"What would you like, Derek?" she said, tensely.

"You," he bit off, "and if I can't have you I shall be forced to tell these men where they might find what they are seeking."

Kayla's lip curled in scorn. She stiffened. Doring smirked. Kayla's voice cracked like a whip and her eyes blazed fire.

"You would tell them I have the plans," she flamed, "you sniveling rat, you spawn of the gutter."

Venom dripped from every syllable as she continued.

"Tell them, dog, tell them I have the plans in my gown. Tell them I hid them there to save your filthy hide."

Like a tigress aroused, Kayla stepped across to Doring. Her hand lashed out and slapped him across the face. Then she whirled on the Inspector.

"Listen to what this coon has to say. Tell them, Derek."

Doring's face was livid. He almost choked. He pointed an accusing finger at Kayla and screamed:

"That she-devil has the plans. They are hidden in her gown. I saw her put them there. Search her. You'll find them."



Like the crack of a gun, a voice snapped thru the room, "That'll do."

The assistant, taken by surprise, stepped close to Kayla. Her hand whipped out and slapped him across the cheek.

"Keep your filthy claws off me," she snarled. "Would you take the word of a snake like that? Have you no chivalry left when you will see a woman accused by such an animal?"

The Inspector glared at Doring. "Perhaps you have made a mistake?" he suggested.

"Non, non," Doring habbled. "She lured a man from the Spanier Works to her apartment. You can see what she is. How could any man

resist her. She forced him to steal the plans. She told him she would be his lover. I am innocent, I tell you. I know nothing about the plans."

"Then," the Inspector rasped, "why were you trying to dispose of those tracings? Remember, we came here for you; not for this lady."

Doring looked hopelessly about. He knew he was trapped. He had neither the brains nor the courage to face the situation calmly. In sudden desperation he balled his fist and dashed it against the jaw of the Inspector knocking him senseless to the floor.

"Quick, Kayla, run!" he screamed in terror. The assistant, however, leaped in and his strong arms seized Doring. He flung him to the floor, but with a strength born of desperation, Doring fought like a demon. His fist smashed against the face of his opponent again and again, but he could not shake him off.

Kayla moved like a panther. She stepped to the table. Her slender fingers closed around a heavy brass flower vase. Her eyes flamed. Clutching the vase tightly she raised it high. Doring saw her.

"Hit him, Kayla; kill him."

Kayla's arm flexed. The heavy vase descended. Her lips were curled in savage hate as she swung. The vase hurtled downward—and struck the floor.

"Let him get out of it himself," she snarled, and raced for the door.

CHAPTER V

KAYLA sat in her apartment. She was bewildered. For the first time in her hectic career a spark of pity had entered her heart. She didn't know who it was for, Doring or Dick Farrell. She knew Dick was hopelessly infatuated with her. She knew Doring wanted her; both for a different, yet after all, the same purpose. She wanted love and she wanted adventure. She didn't want to pay the full price of either. She bit her lip in vexation. Why should she worry over either of the men? She remembered Dick's burning kisses. She stifled a sob. Suddenly her lovely face hardened. She fitted a chic hat to her well-shaped head and left the apartment.

KAYLA's bewitching spell entranced the senior executive of the Spanier Aircraft Works. He regarded her with admiration. From her lovely face to the tips of her dainty patent leather pumps she was a harmonious blend of alluring, soft beauty. He observed,

under discretely lowered brows, that she had an extremely neat ankle. M. Roget liked neat ankles.

"But, my so charming mademoiselle," he breathed, romance flying through his long dormant heart, "it is very true, as you say, we have lost the plans. We are asking no questions but would like very much to have them back."

Kayla flashed a dazzling smile. Her eyes danced and M. Roget's pulse quickened. It had been many years since a lovely woman had smiled on him. He wondered if he dared ask her out. As if in a dream her voice came to him, sibilant and husky.



"M. Roget," she said, convincingly, "those plans were not stolen by one of your employees. Please remember that. They were taken by spies. For fifty thousand francs they will be returned, untouched."

M. Roget's ancient eyes widened. He peered through his pince-nez at the alluring Kayla. He rubbed a bony finger against his thin nose.

"Is it possible, my dear, you know where they are?"

Kayla's hand stole out. She touched M. Roget. He thrilled as though an electric current coursed through him. His heart was doing queer things.

"Yes," she whispered, "I know where they are; but I must have fifty thousand francs. When may I get it?"

M. Roget rose to his feet. He did believe his ears, but he thought his eyes were playing him tricks. How could such a lovely woman touch him? He smoothed his sparse hair and cast an amorous glance at Kayla's slender ankle. His eyes nearly popped from his head. Anticipating his move, Kayla appeared to be examining her garter. Roget saw more than a generous length of intriguing silken-clad legs. He sighed.

"You shall have the money at once," he said jerkily.

A moment later he returned and tossed a thick bundle of bank notes on the desk. Kayla placed them in her purse. She patted M. Roget's wrinkled hand and smiled bewitchingly.

"You are very kind, and also a very clever man," she said softly; "your wife must be a very lucky woman to have such a man as you."

Old Roget thrilled as he had never thrilled for many years. He compared the lovely Kayla to his fat old nagging spouse at home. He was in a dream. He sneaked another covert glance at her exposed limbs.

"Ah," he murmured, "I would indeed be a luckier man to have such a one as you."

Kayla laughed a delicious tinkling laugh.

"Who knows but what you might?" she said archly. "Perhaps you would like to do me another favor."

"With pleasure, with pleasure," Roget exclaimed, his senses leaving him. "What can I do?"

"Keep this transaction very secret and let me have another set of tracings; some that are of no particular value."

Turning to a telephone, Roget called the drafting room and a moment later the plans of the S. V. 4, an obsolete ship, were laid on the desk. Kayla glanced at them and thrust them into her purse.

"Now," she said, rising to her feet, "it is very possible that in the near future you and I, M. Roget, could have champagne together in a quiet place, but for the present I must hurry." She hesitated.

Leaning over, she brushed her lips across those of the old man. He closed his eyes. He was transported to heavens unknown. He felt the light touch of the warm lips; smelled the heady perfume and almost passed out. For twenty-four hours of Kayla's company he would have exchanged his life's work. What was materialism compared to a woman like that?

He came to with a sudden start. His groping fingers closed around a thin package in his lap. He stared at the contents. They were the tracings of the S. V. 7.

"Mon Dieu!" he gasped, "and to think I have wasted half my life with Henriette when such women were about."

KAYLA raced to her apartment and called Dick by telephone. He came at once, but not before she had had time to prepare an elaborate toilette, write a letter and seal it in a bulky envelope.

Dick rushed into the apartment. He caught sight of Kayla and stopped short. She was be-

witching in the same delicate negligee she had worn on their first night in her apartment. He seized her tightly and smothered her with burning kisses.

"Kayla," he gasped.

Kayla's lustrous eyes darkened. Her eyelashes drooped. As though unaware, she dropped her hands and her negligee trailed aside revealing the lissom beauty of her lovely limbs. Instantly, Dick was aflame. His hands ran over her quivering flesh.

"Kayla," he said, hoarsely, "say you are mine, now."

Kayla thrust him back. Her voice was husky; filled with pain as she spoke.

"Dick, you are very nice. I have done you a great wrong. You know nothing of me, nor what I am. It is best that you go away; forget about me. That is why I sent for you. Go now, before I bring you more trouble."

"Never," breathed Dick, "I'll never let you go."

"You must, Dick," Kayla insisted. "Perhaps I might be kind to you for tonight, but it would be harder for you to forget. It will mean ruin for you, so go, while there is yet time."

Dick could scarcely believe his ears. His eyes traveled over her alluring form. Half draped in silken folds, her body called for him insistently.

"Kayla," he said, "I don't care what happens. I want you, always."

Kayla's arms encircled his neck. She inwardly berated herself for her emotion, but outwardly the woman in her clamored for rights. Her eyes were moist. Her voice was trembling, husky as she spoke.

"I want you too, Dick, but it is better that you forget me. Kiss me now—and then go."

Entranced, though deeply hurt, Dick took her in his arms. He kissed her tenderly. He felt her soft body quiver. She pressed kiss after kiss on his lips.

Gently she forced him from her.

"Go, please Dick, go," she entreated.

"What is the trouble, dear?" Dicky said as he reached for his hat.

"I don't know," Kayla faltered. "But I have a feeling there is something wrong. Please hurry, and go."

Kayla's intuition was correct. The door opened and four men, including Doring, entered the room.

"That's him," Doring snarled, pointing at Dick. "That's the man who stole the plans. Take him—and her—she made him do it."

Inspector Duquesne stepped forward. He placed his hand on Dick's shoulder.

"I regret," he said, "but I must take you in for questioning. The charge is theft of airplane plans."

Dick's face blanched. He glanced at Kayla. She was looking at Doring with stood aloof, a sneer on his sallow face. She compared him with Dick. Her heart tugged. She whirled on the Inspector.

"You," she bit off, "are an impossible fool. M'sieur Farrel did not take the plans. Do you take the word of a thing like this?" she demanded, waving a hand at Doring.

The Inspector colored. He looked at Doring. "Don't listen to her," he yelled. "She is Sonia Vasitch, though she calls herself Kayla Cherroff. You've heard of her before."

Indeed they had heard of the slender, beautiful woman who had looted the military secrets of a dozen countries. They looked at Kayla in wonderment.

She was standing erect and alert. Cool as an icicle. Doring's accusation did not unsettle her. She whirled on the Inspector. Her words crackled like a machine gun.

"The man is either a fool or a brave man, and you can see how brave he is. His own name is Vasitch. Sonia is his sister. She keeps him. See, she left a parcel for him; there it is, that envelope."

The Inspector spun on his heel and saw the envelope. He tore it open and glanced at the contents. They were the tracings of the S. V. 4. He hurriedly read the note. It was signed, "Sonia Vasitch," and addressed to Derek Doring though the word sister was used throughout. He glared at Doring.

"You would hide behind the skirts of a woman, dog?" he snapped. "This letter is addressed to you. It contains stolen plans. Take him away," he ordered his subordinates.

Doring's face turned a pasty white. His lips dried. He wilted. Perspiration poured down his smooth brow.

"You she-devil," he spat at Kayla as they led him away.

Both Kayla and Dick were taken to the Surete.

CHAPTER VI

KAYLA, with Dick and Doring, stood before the dreaded Tribunal. Many, more innocent than she, had faced that court. Many had died at Vincennes next morning.

She knew one or all might be convicted. A firing squad would write finis to their careers. Self-preservation, the first law of nature, made itself felt. She prepared for the most crucial

battle of wits she had ever faced. A single misplaced word would place her before twelve men with rifles.

Like a master fencer she parried the adroit questions of the prosecutor. Cool and calm she turned aside his most pointed thrusts. The stern visaged old men of the Tribunal eyed her closely and sighed. They wished they were thirty years younger. War or no war, plans or no plans, they were susceptible to the charms of a lovely woman. Gallantry beat in the hearts of all.

The prosecutor was no exception. He attacked relentlessly and then knew he was losing ground. Kayla's disarming smiles weakened his onslaught. He felt like a pariah dog. It was one thing to prosecute a common spy but to persecute a lovely creature like this was too much. He spread his hands in an expressive gesture.

"I am satisfied the charming mademoiselle has told us the truth," he said gallantly.

The members of the Tribunal wagged their heads sagely. Of course it was ridiculous that

such a lovely woman could have anything to do with espionage. Was she not made to love? Of course. They leaned back in their chairs and closed their eyes. Years fled away and they imagined themselves wooing Kayla.

The Chairman of the Board cleared his throat. He leaned forward.

"There are two questions I would like to ask," he said.

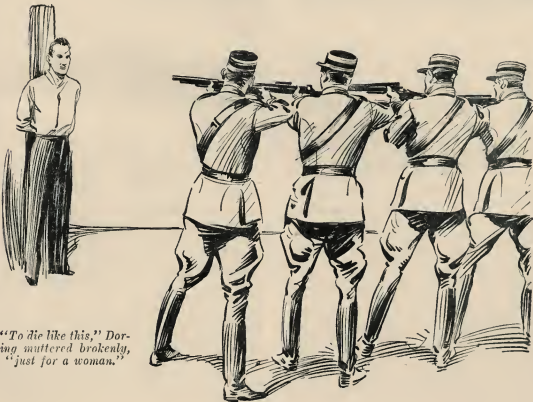
"And those are—" Kayla smiled.

The old man stroked his beard. He caught a provocative glance from Kayla's dark eyes. His pulse quickened. Sapriste! he muttered, must one grow old?

"You must tell us if M. Farrel had anything to do with those plans. It will prove his guilt or innocence. One of these two men is guilty. Why was M. Farrel in your apartment? Is he the man who stole the plans?"

The questions cut Kayla like a knife. The atmosphere grew tense. Life or death hung in the balance. A cold calm gripped her, speeding up her nimble mind.

A panorama flashed before her eyes. Her gaze wandered to Doring, seated in the dock, his face buried in his hands. Suddenly she saw



"To die like this," Doring muttered brokenly, "just for a woman."

him in his true light; realized he was the man who could see eye to eye with her. He was of her own kind, scheming and unscrupulous. Hand in hand they could go through life with no threat to their safety. She knew a future with Derek could be thrilling; filled with romance and interest. If she gave an answer favorable to him could she bear to send Dick to his death?

Her glance traveled to Dick's face. He sat unafraid. His boyish features showed no signs of fear. He was ready to accept whatever the gods decreed.

A mist swam before Kayla's eyes as she remembered how he had tried to protect her in his evidence. A strange feeling tugged at her heart. The Chairman's voice broke in abruptly on her thoughts.

"Does mademoiselle require time to prepare an answer?"

"No, m'sieur," she smiled disarmingly. "I do not thoroughly understand your questions."

The Chairman repeated his queries. Kayla's eyes clouded. She could no longer avoid the issue. She must make her choice.

Doring was suave and scheming. Dick was refreshingly honest. He was lovable. His kisses were clean; not like Doring's, tainted with lust.

Still, Doring's life and her own were linked by their questionable calling. He was good-looking, polished and would make an ideal husband once his first mad passion had passed away. She could travel far and find a worse mate than he. After all, she was in the game for what she could get out of it. Dick could give her no more. Doring could give her much.

She glanced at Dick. A fear gripped her heart. She knew he was fascinated by her unusual type. Older than him and wise in the ways of the world she knew what his reaction would be when the glamor had worn off. If she could settle down—she knew she couldn't. The call of adventure was in her blood. Dick, young, and until he met her, strictly honorable, would never understand. To take his love would wreck his life. Still, why should she sacrifice Doring to save this young fool who had nothing in common with her.

She lowered her eyelashes and looked at Doring. His dark eyes implored her to save him. She weighed the silent plea. Doring was her logical partner. Like the crack of a pistol a thought struck her brain. She remembered how Doring would have sacrificed her to save himself.

With that thought came a vision of the grim prison wall, down and the firing squad. Dick, standing there, his eyes bound. With this

vision came the electrifying shock that she loved Dick more than Derek; herself; life or any other earthly thing. Her woman's heart yearned for him. Swiftly she turned to the Chairman. Her voice was strong, vibrant and convincing. She pointed at Dick.

"That man knew—"

"The prosecutor leaped to his feet.

"About the plans, eh?" he cut in.

Kayla whirled on him.

"No," she snapped, "he knew nothing of the plans. He was in my apartment because—because I—loved him."

Tears flooded her eyes. Her keen brain had been smothered by the insistent call of her heart—and Kayla, at this moment, all woman, had responded to the call.

Dick leaped to his feet. His eyes shone.

"Kayla," he cried, "you can't do this."

"I've done it," she said wearily and sank to her seat.

THE members of the Tribunal glanced sharply at Dick. They wondered if he realized how lucky he was to be loved by a woman like Kayla. They drew together for a conference. A moment later the Chairman rapped for order. He cleared his throat importantly.

"We find M. Farrel not guilty. He is free to go."

Dick rushed to Kayla. His arms went about her. The members of the Tribunal beamed. They sought to throw off another thirty years of grasping age.

"Kayla," Dick said, huskily, "why did you do it?"

"You heard," she said quietly.

"How can I thank you?"

Kayla touched his lips.

"Just be careful, Dicky," she pleaded. "Perhaps, when this is all over, I will show you how."

The Chairman rapped with his gavel.

"M. Farrel will please leave," he said.

"And I—," Kayla put in.

"Must stay," he replied, gruffly.

A SOFT smile stole across Kayla's lovely face. Let them do what they wished with her. She lived and expected to die for a purpose. She had freed Dick. If that was her ultimate purpose she was satisfied. She was a woman and after all, women were meant to protect and mother men. Adventurers she might be. Her schemes and intrigues sent many men to their deaths, but this was different. It was a pity Doring must die. However, he, like she, knew the cost in a losing gamble

with death. She was prepared to pay. Why had she not denounced the two men and saved herself? She shrugged her shoulders. Her heart had guided her tongue. What irony. A pity it hadn't guided it years before. She had thrown away the call of her heart for a life of thrills. For the first time she realized the hollow mockery of a life without love. A wave of tenderness swept over her as she thought of Dick. A trace of moisture appeared in her lustrous eyes. She gathered herself and faced the Tribunal unafraid. She would give them a battle; but if she must pay she would do so smilingly.

COLD dawn at Vincennes. Derek Doring bound to a scarred post in the yard. His head dropped on his breast. With startling vividness he saw Kayla's word picture. An officer stepped forward with a bandage.

"To die like this," Doring muttered brokenly, "just for a woman."

"Oui," the officer sighed, sympathetically, "and there is the woman."

Doring raised his head. He saw Kayla leaning on the arm of a man whom he recognized as the Chairman of the Tribunal. His mind whirled.

"Damn," he groaned, "she has that old fool wrapped around her finger."

The bandage was placed over his eyes. A deadly eternity followed.

"Good-by, Kayla," he called. "We could have been happy together."

He couldn't see the queer smile on Kayla's face. He felt a terrific punch as he heard the crash of the volley. He sank to the ground.

Kayla dazed, grasped the Chairman's arm.

"His sister will follow him soon," the Chairman said, softly. "It is fortunate for you, my dear, his sister did not acquaint you with the

contents of that envelope. You might have been there with him. That would have been a pity."

"Sister," Kayla repeated, wonderingly. "Oh, yes, his sister."

How could she tell this spell-bound old Romeo, Doring had no sister. Possibly the old man didn't care.

"It is fortunate for me," he said absently, "that M'sieur Farrel leaves for America this morning."

Kayla stopped suddenly. She gripped his arm.

"America, you say?"

"Yes, a large company have offered him a better position, at our request. It is better. He might be tempted. If he were found at your apartment again, others might take a different view and you would face a firing squad. As I said before, that would be a pity."

Kayla's senses reeled. Dick had left for America. Agents of the Surete had placed him on a liner. Instinctively she knew that if she played at love-making she would be safe. Let her refuse the attentions of the higher-ups and her life would be forfeited. She shrugged her shapely shoulders. From now on it would be a battle of wits with death at the end. The world became empty—a hollow void. She would play with them awhile and then—she shook her lovely head as the car sped through a village. She smiled at the Chairman.

"A pity, you say?"

"Yes, a thousand pities."

She looked into the future; a future without Dick. She thought of Doring, cold in death, all worldly cares at an end. Somewhere she heard a child prattle. Her beautiful face softened. Her eyes glowed softly.

"Wonder," she said simply, and placed her arm around the old man's neck."

Satan's Step-Daughter

(Continued from page 51)

ing received the full strength of that drug she had administered to him in his glass of brandy.

Zita locked the door and bent over Hawk. Her deft fingers soon found his money belt, strapped about his middle. In a few minutes' time she had it loose and unfastened. It was filled with money! She counted them. Seventy-five thousand dollars in big bills. So—he had lied to her after all! He'd received a hundred thousand for the gem!

Suddenly, she spied something wrapped in cotton. Quickly she pulled away the covering to see revealed—the red diamond! The cheat,

he had had two substitute diamonds made instead of one! The first to fool Mrs. Leland and the second to fool herself. No doubt while she was out booking their passage he would have left with the brown-eyed, passionate, Kashmiri wench!

Zita threw back her red curls and laughed, such a laugh it was, that the sleeping man on the floor stirred slightly. So—Hawk Gleason had the brains and she had nothing but beauty. What a joke!

And even Satan joined in the merriment of his step-daughter.

Sins of The Mothers

by

CLIVE STEWART

RITA MURGARD dismissed her male secretary with a wave of her well-manicured hand.

"That's all now, Graves. See that I am not disturbed for the next half-hour."

The man turned slowly on his heel, covertly eyeing his employer's magnificent figure and half-averted face as he did so. Lord, what a woman, he thought, beautiful as that mythical Helen of Troy for whom thousands of men died centuries before. Beautiful, but as cold as ice. As he closed the door behind him and walked to his desk the man sighed audibly.

Alone, Rita swung her swivel chair so that you could look out over the sunlit waters of San Francisco Bay, spread out far below the lofty office building, in which her luxuriously appointed office was situated. Her beautiful face wore a thoughtful expression. It was rarely the business-like Rita allowed herself the time for retrospection.

From the outer office the steady clicking of half a dozen typewriters assured her that her all-male office force were not emulating their employer's example. Business was good at the office of "Rita Murgard, Inc., Coffee Broker." The legitimate business that was used as a blind for that other more sinister traffic that had brought Rita her great wealth.

Rita Murgard imported coffee, but she also did a great deal of undercover exporting as well. Not coffee, however, but flesh—feminine flesh!

She was the sole head of one of the largest and best organized white slave rings in the world. A ring whose ramifications stretched

*Fate takes a hand...and
the woman who sold
others into white slavery
pays a terrible price*



from the office in which she sat, southward down through Mexico and Central America to the dives and brothels of the Argentina ports. Westward to the houses of ill-fame in the seething Chinese and Japanese seaport towns, with intermediate stops in the various islands in the Pacific Ocean.

Every month in the year scores of the girls reported missing in the larger cities of the United States, went drugged and helpless, aboard the dirty little tramp steamers that Rita Murgard operated between the U. S. and South America or the Orient. Others traveled southward over the Mexican border concealed under rugs at the bottom of fast cars, driven by ostensible tourists. No matter what their destination, however, they were all bound for a life of shame and horror, from which death or a diseased premature old age was their only release.

IT WAS from the sale of the bodies and souls of these girls to the keepers of brothels, for the sensual gratification of lecherous brown and yellow skinned men, that Rita had gained her great wealth. She alone knew how great was the amount of ready cash concealed in safety deposit boxes in a score of banks, stretching from New York to San Francisco. Hundreds of men and women procurers worked for her, yet a scant half-dozen knew even the name of the person whom their labors enriched.

Scores of business men in the city knew and admired Rita Murgard for her beauty and keen business sense. They considered her one of the shrewdest brokers in the city and respected her cleverness, which coupled with a cold gambler's brain, allowed her to put through deals that they themselves would have been afraid to chance.

There had been many whose interest had been more personal than business-like. The flaming voluptuous beauty of the woman broker drew men like a magnet draws steel. Several had proposed marriage, while others had made offers of a less conventional partnership. To each and every proposition Rita had turned a deaf ear and a cold, slow smile of negation.

Her life as far as most observers could discern seemed entirely wrapped up in her brokerage business. She lived alone in one of the most fashionable apartment houses in the city, a Chinese houseboy her only servant. The boy was a eunuch. She never had any social engagements nor any female friends. Every employee in her office was male and her aversion for even speaking to a woman was well known. Many opinions were hazarded in regard to

this peculiarity, some of them weird and of a kind not mentioned in polite society. But no one ever guessed the real truth.

CHAPTER II

FIFTEEN years before, in an eastern city, Rita Murgard, then known as Rita Markle, had lost the only man she had ever loved. She had married him straight from a convent school and had given him a depth of passion and love that more sophisticated women are rarely capable of giving.

For three years after her marriage Rita Markle had been supremely happy with her husband and the small golden-haired daughter that had been the fruit of their marriage. Then John Markle, growing sated with legitimate love, had sought variety with other women. He had met Flora Devore, an artificial blonde whose subtle hard beauty held a lure like a well-cut diamond and whose heart might well have been of the same material. She had loved John Markle as much as she was capable of caring for any man and had persuaded him to leave his wife and child. Converting nearly everything of value that he possessed into cash the love-besotted man had fled to Paris with his paramour, leaving Rita and the child practically penniless.

It was weeks before the final realization of what had been done to her came home to the deserted wife. Then tearless and grim-mouthed she had stood beside her marriage bed and had sworn that other women should pay for what one had done to her. From the crucible of pain and anguish there came a new Rita. One without feeling or compunction in regard to others. A living blade that thirsted only for the blood of revenge. A brain that was cool, calculating and that could plan like a man.

Her first thought was of the woman who had robbed her of happiness. She possessed a tiny yearly income that had been left to her by her dead parents. Her first step was to convert the principle into cash thereby gaining the means to follow the trail of the eloping pair.

To her changed personality her blonde-haired daughter was abhorrent. The child had characteristics of the father. Packing the child's belongings she took it to the home of her only living relative, a spinster cousin. In spite of the woman's fluttering protests she left the child in her care and three days later was on a ship bound for France.

IT TOOK weeks of searching and inquiry to locate the pair she sought and when at last she found their address, yet more weeks passed

before she could obtain the instruments necessary for her revenge.

The seum of the Paris underworld gaped at the sight of a beautiful and expensively clothed woman who suddenly began to haunt their dens. Night after night she sat alone drinking her wine at a filthy table, seemingly unconscious of the sensation that her presence in such places caused. Once or twice the fierce Apaches, who prey on the demi-mondaine and women of the Paris sub-strata thought to take advantage of her apparent helplessness. But after she had produced a small but deadly automatic and shot one leering man through the stomach, the animalistic lusts of the others had been considerably dampened.

IT WAS just after this she made the contacts she had been seeking. Jules Crepain, King of the Paris White Slave Ring, had chanced to hear of her exploit. He had come one night to stare and to his surprise had been invited to partake of wine with the beautiful stranger. At first he had preened himself with the thought that it had been his charms as a man that were responsible for the invitation, but a few moments' conversation soon disillusioned him. It was disappointing of course, but business is business, he concluded, and this mysterious woman seemed to have more brains in her little finger than most women had in their whole bodies. Watchers saw the White Slaver's manner change and grow business-like. For an hour the two talked and then Jules rose and summoned a taxi for his new-found business associate.

FOUR nights later, as John Markle and his paramour entered a ramshackle taxi, a black jack descended on his head and strong hands stifled the cries of Flora Devore.

The next morning the river police found the dead body of a man dressed in evening clothes and later identified as that of a rich American named Markle, floating in the Seine.

THREE evenings later a blonde woman, half-dazed with drugs, fought against the overwhelming assault of a drunken Senegalese soldier in a Marshalls brothel. Rita Markle had started on her trail of revenge.

CHAPTER III

THEN Rita Markle disappeared forever. A glorious beautiful woman, superbly gowned, made her appearance in the important cities of South America during the

next few months. She was known as Rita von Herm and was in some vague manner believed to be connected with several French agents who provided singers and dancers for the various places of amusement. Soon from one end of South America to the other the hot-blooded Latins were at her feet. Supremely indifferent to them all she took what they offered and gave nothing in return.

Wealthy ranch owners from the pampas squandered fortunes to give her jewels. Lovelick seions of wealthy families mortgaged their inheritances with the money lenders to emulate the example of their elders in the matter of gifts. Coldly, contemptuously, the woman accepted the passionate love making and gifts. Apparently nothing could make an impression of her armor of frigidity.

In Buenos Aires a relative of the ruler of the country fought a duel for a fancied slight against Rita von Herm. He killed his opponent.

In Rio de Janeiro a man was found shot beneath her window. To the police the woman explained that he had tried to enter her room by the window and she had shot him. Because of the position of the dead man the affair was hushed up. Then after five years Rita von Herm disappeared as quickly as she had appeared.

AS THOUGH warned by a premonition Rita again appeared in her home city to find that the cousin with whom she had left her daughter lay on her deathbed. The spinster's last hours had been tormented by worry as to the child's welfare after she had gone. She had not known Rita's whereabouts. Money for the support of the child had come to her at regular intervals from various banks with strange foreign names on their note paper. An hour after Rita's arrival the good woman sighed contentedly and died.

A month later Rita, now known as Rita Murgard, had arranged for the adoption of her daughter by a childless couple in California. The adopted parents were of moderate financial circumstances, but of good social position. They had cheerfully accepted the large yearly allowance that Rita's lawyer had proffered so that the child might have every advantage.

Rita, herself, had not appeared in the negotiations at all. She had stipulated that the child was not to be told of her existence at all. Everything was handled through the lawyer. One condition only had the mother insisted on, every three months a complete report of the

child's doings and welfare was to be forwarded to the lawyer, who in turn would send it to her. Then with a finality that had become characteristic during the last five years, she had dismissed the child from her thoughts and settled in San Francisco. Here all her energy had gone into creating the legitimate brokerage business that was to form so effective screen for the other vile traffic that was to be her lifelong revenge on womanhood.

CHAPTER IV

ON THIS bright spring morning the quarterly report had arrived from the lawyer in the morning mail. Instead of scanning it quickly and throwing it to one side as was her usual custom, she had read every word of it over and over.

She had learned that the select Miss Pryor's School for Girls had closed for the summer and that Mildred had gone to spend her vacation with friends of her adopted parents, the Medfords, in the vicinity of San Pedro to the south. That the girl was in excellent health and had done very well scholastically.

Rita, for the first time in years, was suddenly conscious of unfamiliar stirrings in the atrophied organ she called her heart. Memories of the daughter that she had not seen for ten years came trooping into her mind. A great nostalgia to see this girl who was flesh of her flesh came to her. In a moment she made up her mind. She would catch the evening plane for San Pedro. Once there she would make arrangements to see her daughter and talk to her without the girl guessing her identity. What the outcome of the meeting would be time alone would tell. Her decision made, Rita dropped the report into a convenient drawer in her desk and brought her mind back to business.

She was expecting a visit from Louis Bavard, one of her lieutenants in the White Slave Ring, and one of the few who knew her identity as head of the ring.

BAVARD, a dark, handsome man, who was really a South American, but who liked to boast that his blood was pure Castilian, posed as a wealthy idler. In reality he was the head of that part of the ring that procured the girl victims.

The methods of the agents who worked under his direction were as diversified as the classes of society to which they posed as belonging.

Middle-aged, respectably clad couples loitered around the great railway depots of the country. Here they accosted young girls who

from their appearance were apparently paying their first visit to the city. With offers of cheap lodgings or hints of employment they lured their innocent victims to their homes. Here, once in the procurer's power, the girls were drugged and delivered to other agents of the ring who shipped them from the country.

Other agents were young men of the gigolo type. These frequented the large hotels in the cities and Florida during the winter, and in the summer went to the fashionable beaches. In these spheres they would strike up acquaintance with some foolish and unescorted girl. A few shows, dinners and a little innocuous love-making would follow. The agents without exception were the type of men who would prove physically attractive to romantic women. A casual invitation to visit the apartment of the agent would be proffered. Here the ultimate procedure would always be the same, a "doped" highball would render the victim unconscious. Sometimes she would then be the victim of a sadistic attack, before she was handed over to the shippers, to go down on the police blotter as "Missing."

The amount paid by the ring for each girl varied according to the environment in which she was taken. The men who hunted in the hotels and on the beaches had, of course, to make a good appearance and he well supplied with money for entertainment of their victims. Their expenses were of course twice as great as the agents that worked the railway depots. Consequently these agents, who, in the parlance of the ring were known as "gets," received one thousand dollars for each girl they turned over to the ring, while the other agents were given about five hundred.

Bavard had started as a "get," but in a few years his suave manners coupled with a shrewd brain had pushed him up to the position of their leader or "pay-off" man. He and the chief of the men who arranged for the transportation of the girls out of the country worked hand in glove.

WHEN he was ushered into Rita's office an hour later, she greeted him with the nearest approach to geniality that she ever extended to any man, in or out of the ring. Bavard was secretly in love with his employer and had been for several years. Yet, being clever, he had never allowed her to guess the true state of his feelings toward her, guessing that if she knew of the passion that consumed him whenever he was in her presence, she would make arrangements for his demise without a qualm.

When they had greeted each other and he

had locked the door, at her request, he seated himself and they both lit cigarettes. He gave a terse report of the activities of the ring during the past month and listened silently while she gave him some instructions. He soon saw that she was impatient to get his visit over and ever diplomatically he rose to leave as soon as she had finished giving him instructions. On his way to the door he suddenly paused and walked back to the desk.

"Must be getting absent-minded in my old age," he smiled. "You'll have to let me have some cash, chief. Just sent five 'parcels' over the Mexican border early yesterday morning. Four thousand of it belongs to the Morales crowd, but the extra one is my own." He smiled thinly, giving her a glimpse of his gleaming teeth. "Been doing a little 'get' work to keep my hand in, you know."

RITA smiled in an absent sort of fashion and opened a drawer in her desk. A small pearl-handled automatic reposed on top of a steel dispatch box in the drawer. Placing the gun to one side, she put the box on the desk before her. Reaching into the bosom of her dress she brought out a small key fastened to a gold chain and opened the box. It was filled with notes of large denominations.

Slowly she counted out five thousand dollars and handed them to the man, returning the box to the drawer as soon as she had done so. Bavard thanked her and reached into an inner coat pocket for his wallet. With a laugh he pulled out a small gold mesh bag and tossed it on the desk top.

"Part of the spoils, chief. Keep it if you fancy it. I was down in San Pedro last week enjoying a little vacation. I met one of those smart school girls there, who believed she knew life with a capital L," he laughed sneeringly.

"Well, I think she knows a lot more about it now. She's been in one of those Mexican-Chinese houses below the border for the last thirty-six hours. Those Chinks sure love to educate a new white girl."

Inpassive Rita nodded and picked up the mesh bag. The catch had opened when it struck the desk and now its contents cascaded onto the polished surface. Rita looked at them. They consisted of a small leather case, a lipstick, handkerchief and a few small bills. With mild curiosity she opened the case and extracted one of the pieces of engraved cardboard. Carelessly she glanced at it. Then suddenly she went rigid in her seat. Her large



"Part of the spoils, chief. Keep it if you fancy it," he said.

eyes dilated and the voluptuous bosom rose and fell rapidly. Slowly the color drained from her face leaving it a ghastly white. Her eyes turned toward Bavard who stood watching her in amazement, and suddenly blazed with a mad fire. Her hand darted into a drawer.

FIFTEEN minutes later, summoned by an alarmed office force who had heard shots from their employer's office, but had been un-
(Continued on page 91)

Numbers On a Broad

by

DON JAMES

*Proving that even the
fluffiest kitten has
claws and that it is
best to assume that
"Dumb Doras" are
legendary creatures*



BURTON ANDREWS gave the newsboy a dime, took the paper and scanned the headlines rapidly. He pointed a finger at one item.

"See that?" he asked.

"Yeah," replied Tom Blake of the *Press*, "I wrote it. Plenty of blackmail now since the liquor racket folded."

Together they turned into the canopied entrance to the Club Royale. The door man nodded pleasantly, and said: "Good evening, gentlemen."

Selecting a table, they were hardly seated when suddenly a flash pan burst into life. A harsh white light leaped into being. A woman screamed and a sleek-haired, nervous youth worked with a camera.

Voices hushed. Faces blanched with something of fear. Then came an undertone of anger. By the time the latter had formed the photographer was on his way.

"Ten to one there is someone here who can't afford to be seen in such a place," Andrews hazarded. "Especially with some woman other than his wife."

Blake nodded, said: "It's old, but sometimes it's good."

They both looked about to see if they could recognize any person of importance who did not belong in such a setting.

The place settled back to normal. At the many small tables under the soft glow of colored and shaded lights, the cream of the city's racketeers and their current women were very much in evidence. Diamonds glittered, laughs were loud and attention compelling. Here and there celebrities of the underworld basked in the lime-light, smiling that fixed smirk that shouts "counterfeit" to everyone who sees it.

Blue smoke floated lazily on the heavy, sweat-laden atmosphere; the nasal whine of woodwinds and the thumping beat of tom-toms aroused couples from their alcoholic stupor to get out on the postage stamp dance floor and go through what was charitably called dancing.



The gyrations were as primitive and sensual as was the music horrified from the depths of the African jungle.

A waiter who looked like a solemn-faced minister put down drinks in front of them. Blake sipped his, and said: "That blonde,"—with a slight nod of head—"doesn't seem to belong."

Andrews loved, grinned widely. He took a swallow from the glass in front of him, a deep drag on his cigar, and blew a cloud of heavy smoke through his nostrils. Hitching both elbows on the table, he leaned slightly forward and said:

"Yeah, Blake: I'll admit that dizzy looking dame does seem out of place in a gun-joint, but looks are a mighty deceiving package at times, and this is one of the times. If you got to talk to Little Margy for a few minutes you'd reverse yourself and wonder what this joint held for a broad like her. She's smart, and when I say smart I don't mean just book-wise. Margy has learned lessons in a school that doesn't recognize a fair average; where you have to know all the answers. To look at her you'd put her down as shallow, and again you'd be wrong, for she's deep—plenty deep."

"Margy is a great dreamer and her dreams usually cost people a lot of money, for they're not the kind that come out of the pipe. See that big, black-haired guy she's sitting with? That's her man, Maxie Silver. Maxie is one of the keenest con-men on the streets today and he owes his success to Little Margy. She's the brains of the combine and it's been her conniving mind that has figured ways and means by which to coax a lot of shekels out of one-way pockets."

"She's smart, and—kinky. That's usually a troublesome combination. For a long time I didn't believe the stir was built that would ever see Little Margy in it with a number attached to her shirt-tail, or wherever it is they put numbers on a broad when the law wins a bet. But let me tell you a story—it's a good one."

"Okay," Blake agreed, "hut I'm a poor listener when I'm dry." He beckoned a waiter and ordered another round of drinks. Burton Andrews sampled his, said: "Here's the yarn:

"Several years ago Maxie and Margy take their annual pleasure jaunt to Florida. As a rule they don't work at such times, but this round they had a push pushed at 'em, and Little Margy is not a girl to kick a lot of greenbacks out of a window."

"It is Margy's flapperish demeanor that starts the deal, without any effort on her part whatever, and Maxie's big, he-man frame provided the means of carrying it through."

"They are registered at the swank Astorhilt and enjoying themselves to the limit after a strenuous season clipping a humper crop of suckers. Together, you'd have taken them for a newly married couple deeply in love with each other; Margy by herself seems the giddy dapper daughter of indulgent rich parents. She's always acted that way ever since I've known her; perhaps it's her racket that's taught her to pose so naturally."

WELL, Margy is sunning herself on the beach one day when a slippery looking bird eases up and busts out with a line of conversation. The guy has the guts of a Bengal tiger on the loose and Margy's pointed hints don't mean a thing in the world to him; he keeps right on chattering, and a few of his remarks arouse something akin to interest in Little Margy's ever wary and opportunity seeking brain.

"The fellow makes just enough slips to incline Margy to believe he's something other than the Allen G. Montgomery, the moniker by which he introduces himself. Margy opens up a little, and by methods of which she is a past-master, sounds the mark to his shoe-soles before the afternoon is over. The more he talks the more interested she becomes. The fellow sees this and gets enthusiastic. But if he could have peered into that hazy brain of Little Margy's he'd have had reason to feel otherwise."

"She's got him pegged as a small-time short-con artist looking for a dumb flapper he can soft-soap out of some dough. The method he intends using is a mystery to Margy, but it tickles her to think the goof picked her. She hands him a dumb line that is custom built; encourages him all the way through, and when the afternoon sun is sinking lower in the skies they part, Margy satisfied that the yokel is securely on the line."

"When Margy and Silver meet in their suite she puts the 'Hebe' wise to the play, and they stick their heads together figuring methods by which they can add this would-be con artist to their list of suckers."

"The mark meets Margy on the beach again the following day and his Oxford accent and vivid tales of the ancestral mansion in England almost makes her laugh in his face. The farce continues and they meet every day for a week before the bird that calls himself Monty works up the courage to invite Margy up to his rooms."

"Margy puts on the innocent maiden act and of course refuses, even if somewhat reluctant-

ly, so as to leave the chump a flickering of hope for the future. He nurses this hope a couple of days and repeats the invite with an off-hand remark about some etchings he wants to show her. Margy almost chokes trying to keep from spoiling it all. Etchings! Any broad with a dime's worth of sense knows enough to steer clear of guys who want to show them art collections—in their own rooms. But with a few verbal misgivings uttered in an undecided manner, she finally agrees, and up they go."

"Margy plants on the davenport and Monty produces the etchings. He settles alongside her and they start through the collection. The first ones are ordinary, but they get better as they go along—much better, and much warmer. Little Margy takes it all as a matter of course, for it's art, isn't it!

"Monty's courage mounts and it's but a short time until he manages to have an arm around Margy's waist, and she seems inclined to disregard the matter entirely. With growing confidence the guy tries for her lips, but she times his shot and all the oaf gets is a smack at the back of her neck. Margy hops to her feet. A half-smile wreaths her features, but she makes it plain that she isn't going in for any heavy lovin', not right away at least. She pleads an engagement elsewhere and after assuring Monty that she'll see him again, out she goes."

"Accidental-like, she manages to bump into Mr. Montgomery in the hotel lobby the next day about noon. He is delighted, and after a moment's small talk, once more suggests a visit to his rooms. With an effective bit of reluctance, Margy finally lets him talk her into the proper mood and up they go. Well, Margy figures she might as well play along with the clown slowly like, so he manages to get a taste of her lips, with her returning the compliment. But she evades his passes and manages to keep him at arm's length. The mark imagines that he's all set now and springs a suggestion for a little private party for the evening. Little Margy agrees and again she almost has to laugh in his face; the expression on his kisser suddenly reminds her of a con dog that's licking its chops in anticipation, having just found an opening into a hen-house."

"Margy gives her Maxie the low-down, and figuring that the blow-off is liable to happen, they make the necessary arrangements. She dresses in a filmy, revealing creation of the kind that has upset the balance of better men than Mr. Montgomery; the thing clings to her like she was poured into it. Not a curve does it hide, and Margy's got some nice curves, if you'll notice."

SHORTLY after nine she raps timidly at the Mark's door and he beamingly ushers her in to a table set for two. The service is Ritzy, the food good, and the wine the kind you and I read about, but seldom see. The small talk run to Monty's vast English interests and what a man he is in his own country. Little Margy plays along, giving a masterful portrayal of the character she has adopted. She tells him of the Van Thorntons, of the Virginia Van Thorntons, you know; of the father's clean-up when the bulls are caught short on Wall Street. The information causes his eyes to sparkle even more than has the wine. He expands visibly."

"With the table cleared out, the clown turns on the radio suggesting that they dance a little. They do, and from what I learn later, those birds out there wriggling now couldn't have taught this Montgomery a single thing about the art of clutch 'em close. Little Margy turns on her best blush and the sap thinks he's managed to get her all warmed up for the occasion and proceeds to steer her to the davenport."

"Margy offers her lips and things proceed smoothly until the mark's hands begin to get inquisitive and he manages to unlouse a couple of hooks that hold her form-fitting dress together. She registers a protest and begins to wonder if she has been wrong about this clown, and whether he hasn't designs on something other than her pocketbook. She has further reason to wonder when he suddenly starts to wrestle her around like they are the main event of a catch-as-catch-can show."

"She struggles loose from the guy and he makes a sudden snatch which she partially dodges, but he has a grip on her dress and it falls in a filmy heap at her feet, leaving Little Margy standing there in her peach-colored scanties. She gives a little squeal and stoops to gather up her dress, but before she even manages to retrieve the thing a frozen-faced dame wearing eye-glasses steps into the room. Margy makes a dive for the davenport and gets behind it, trying to hide her half-naked body, but the W. C. T. U. looking mama will have none of that."

COME out of that, you hrazen hussey," she tosses, and Margy decides her tongue's been seasoned in gall and vinegar. When Little Margy finally does arise shamefacedly, the old sister gives her a mean double-o, and proceeds to lay her out in lavender. It was the nearest tongue-lashing Margy ever received, and she takes it with her head hanging. Frozen-face winds up with a line that shows the froen-

"If you think you're going to steal my husband right from under my nose, you can think again, you brazen little tramp! Just because you've more money than you know what to do with, you want a new man every day in the week to go with it! I'll see your father about this, and you mark my words!"

"Oh, she puts it on nice and thick all right. Little Margy begins to sob softly, and begs her not to go to her father. Well, they chew the rag about it, and the final decision is that the dame will lay off for the trifling sum of ten grand. Margy howls murder. She protests that she has no ten thousand and that she can't go to her father and get that amount in one linnp sum. Frozen-face seems strangely unmoved; it is the ten G's—or else.

"Margy rants and raves, offering a compromise, but there is nothing doing. Finally she begins to threaten herself between soles. But all that makes no more effect on Frozen-face than if she had been an old-fashioned cigar store Indian.

"Suddenly Margy makes a grab in her pocketbook and comes out with a small but business-like automatic. She points the thing diagonally across her breast and then squeezes the trigger. A short, sharp report fills the room and Margy crumples to a heap on the floor, blood seeping through her dress in a steady trickle out onto the carpet.

"Frozen-face and Short-con Monty are speechless for a moment and then they start blaming each other for what has happened. Monty runs around the suite like a mad-man, ready to pull his hair out by the roots. Frozen-face thaws very suddenly indeed, and shows more emotion than you would believe possible.

"Murder! Murder! Monty throws at her. 'Get your things packed and let's scam out of here before the law arrives.' He lost all that Oxford accent in the excitement and sounds more like an Ozark native by now.

"They are tossing things into suit-cases in frantic haste when a loud knock sounds at the door. They stall for time and the knocking becomes more insistent. Monty essays a window fade-out, but it's no go—they're too high up.

THE door flies open with a crash, and there is Maxie, a rod in his mitt, looking like a hotel dick in the blood.

"Never mind the packing," he commands as his eye comes to rest on the partly filled bags. "Where you're going you need few clothes and the state'll supply those."

"He cans the chatter, gives them the dog-eye and suddenly blossoms out in a self-satisfied smirk

"Well! Well! Benny Logan, alias Allen G. Montgomery and a few other odd names, you've finally managed to get yourself in a swell pickle with your old-fashioned game. Murder! And you doubtless know they've got a habit of burning people for murder in this state!"

"We didn't shoot her! Honest to God we didn't, officer! Monty pleads, but his outburst is cut short.

"Stow it! Maxie barks in the best official style, 'I'm not the judge, you can save your story—if you've got one—for him. But who's the girl?'

"He walks over to where Little Margy lays in a heap surrounded by an ever-growing pool of blood, peers down at her and purses his lips in a noiseless whistle. He says:

"Old Van Thornton's daughter! An' only kid, too! I wouldn't be in you two birds' shoes for all the dough in the treasury; that old warrior will spend every million he's got to see you sizzle! Ease over to that phone careful like, Mr. Montgomery, and call the office."

"The now plainly perturbed Frozen-face and the fake Montgomery both begin to talk at once. They cajole and they plead, they beg and they whine.

"For God's sake, officer, don't do anything like that! We're in a tough spot and know it, but we didn't shoot the girl; why she's still got the gun in her hand. We were only trying to shake her down and she up and shot herself," Monty blurts out, putting everything he has in the way of earnestness into the words.

"Yeah! She has still got the gun in her mitt," Maxie admits thoughtfully, then adds: "But that doesn't let you off; go on and call the office."

"Monty and Frozen-face look at each other. They can't stand a pinch on any rap whatever, and that body is going to be damn hard to explain, especially when the girl's father has millions to look into explanations.

"Monty clears his throat nervously, and says: 'Isn't there any way we can fix this, officer?'

"The state'll fix it," Maxie barks, 'and doubtless do a swell job of it.'

"Five thousand?" Monty offers.

"Grab that phone!" snaps Maxie in reply.

"Ten thousand?" boasts Monty hopefully.

"Maxie wavers a little and the two have a sigh of relief. They get together and talk business. Maxie is a business man—and they sell out plenty. After he gets everything they've got he shoos them out the door without time to pack anything to take along. He even takes a couple rocks off of Frozen-face, and hurries

them on their way with the warning that they have but a half-hour to get in the clear; he's going to have to make a report then.

THE door slams shut behind them, and Maxie opens it a crack to make sure the pair are on their way, then turns about and chortles: 'Okay, Margy! It worked like a charm! His manner is triumphant.

"Little Margy sits up with a grin, then wrinkles her nose in disgust as she looks at her blood-soaked dress.

"Let's get out of here, Maxie; I need a bath and need it bad. I smell like a slaughterhouse with all this blood smeared over me," Margy declares, ending with a short, silvery peal of laughter.

"Maxie snorts.

"For sixteen grand and these stones I would be willing to smell like the animal with the white stripes down his back," he states, and as he talks he is counting the dough—counting it toward himself, as is the long established custom of the 'Hebe' race."

T O M BLAKE looked at his companion, incomprehension showing plainly on his face; finally he said: "How about the blood business; I don't get it."

Burton Andrews grinned widely.

"No? Well, perhaps I didn't explain; but as I told you, Little Margy always has her feet on the ground. When she was behind that davenport getting back into her dress, she slipped a toy hot-water bottle full of red ink under her brassiere."

"And fired the shot, punctured the hag with a nailfile or something," Blake added in understanding, a grin blossoming on his face as he glanced over at the girl. Then he asked another poser: "But how do you know all about this?"

Andrews laughed and said: "That's the good part of it! Ned Bentz and I were down

there for an insurance company that was howling about jewel robberies in that section. We had a room next to that of the phoney Allen G. Montgomery, and when Little Margy squeezed the trigger we heard the report, and pegging it for a shot, did a little investigating.

"It didn't take much to get us up to what was going on, especially when I recognized Silver and Margy. We decided to take a hand in the game. Bentz planted at the elevator and took Monty and Frozen-face as they hurried to get away; I grabbed Silver and Margy as they stepped out of the room.

"The tangle was so damn funny that it



ticked some of the people down there enough that the four of them only drew a deuce apiece, when they might have gotten ten years! They must have just sprung, for this is the first I've seen 'em about since that time."

Andrews was lost in meditation for a moment, then his grin bloomed again as he said: "You know, I've always wanted to know where they tack the numbers on a broad when the law wins a bot—think I'll amble over and ask Little Margy!"

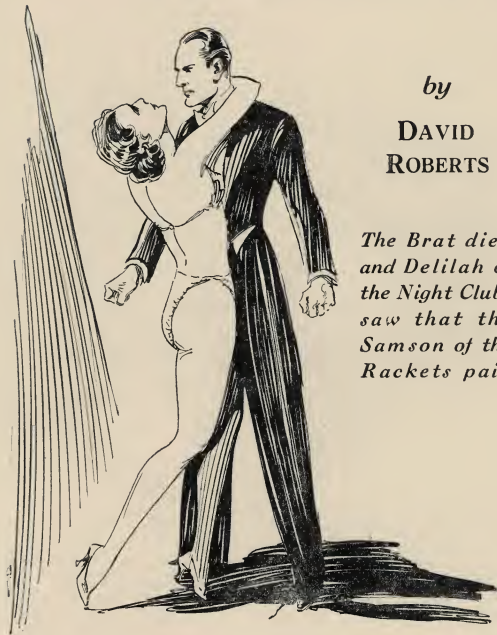
DELILAH

DELILAH

51

by
**DAVID
ROBERTS**

*The Brat died
and Delilah of
the Night Clubs
saw that the
Samson of the
Rackets paid*



NAIDA never had been an emotional creature; featured night-club dancers seldom are, and on this black night that marked the passing of The Brat she went into the alley, looked at him a few minutes, and turned silently away.

But the memory of that forlorn, shapeless heap that in life had been her youngest and most loved brother, would remain forever. The Brat, with bullets in his back, was dead—cut down by a gun whose trigger was jerked by a grimy underworld finger. Regarding his slaying the underworld had been strangely silent, the wiseacres clamm-up whenever she opened the topic. And the police had been use-

less, terming The Brat's killing as "just another underworld bump-off that saved us a job."

Naida was thinking of The Brat, as she had constantly since that night several weeks ago, but her hand never faltered as she put the finishing touches to her make-up. In fact, she was humming a funny little tune that had no particular tempo as she got up from the make-up table.

OUTSIDE, in the big room ringed with a double row of tables, filled with the night-hawks of the town, hazy with the smoke of many cigarettes, and purring with voices prattling meaningless phrases, Tommy Tompkins and his Melody Rogues were blaring the very newest thing in rumbas. Oh, everything at the Club Tally-ho was the very newest—including Naida's *Danse de Afrique*.

She could hear all the sounds of the club coming through the flimsy partition that served as a dressing room. Ten minutes and she'd be out there—dancing before the crowd. Ugh! The mere thought of the bulging, pop-eyed old fools that slobbered their drinks and reeked with the fumes of unquenchable lust sickened her. And the professional beauties who piloted the old fools to this night clippery—beauties without a decent brain to guide them. Ugh!—again.

"She hated it all." No, she loved it. She loved the daring fringes of the life, the threats that lay beyond. It was the nearest approach to adventure. It was hell! Damn it, she had to dance, didn't she? Yes, she had to—especially now, with The Brat murdered, his killer scot-free, laughing. More than ever before she had to stay close to the underworld that knew and wouldn't tell. She had to find out, and then...

Naida slipped the make-up-spotted dressing gown from her shoulders and stood there, naked before the full-length mirror. She was a gorgeous creature, from the tinted nails of her toes to the raven black of her hair. Her legs were straight, slim, but grandly round, her hips not too broad. She eyed herself critically, her hands passing lingeringly over her firm, pink-tipped breasts. No wonder the old fools stared and stared and slobbered their drinks.

SUDDENLY, from outside, there came the crack of a pistol shot. The music strangled in a moaning discord and was replaced by shrill feminine shrieks, and the hoarse shouting of men. Naida turned a startled head. Someone was running, the pounding footsteps coming near and nearer. And then the dressing room door burst open.

He wasn't much older in appearance than had been The Brat, and, too, there was some resemblance of features. He was just inside the door, breathless, staring. "The cops!" he whispered. And there was a mighty plea in those two words.

It was over in an instant. Naida merely lifted the lid of her wardrobe trunk and said, "Quick!" and lowered the lid again. She grabbed at the dressing gown and was holding it loosely before her naked body when the cops came in.

Naida screamed long and loud. It was part of the act, and it worked. Outraged, that's what she was. Who were the cops to come busting into her dressing room, when she was—was entirely unprepared to receive male visitors? What privileges did they think they had that other men were not allowed? That's what she wanted to know. And, by jingo, she'd find out if she had to go all the way to the commissioner, who happened to be a friend of . . .

Reluctant apologies came, were reluctantly accepted, and the cops scattered. Naida laughed, hummed a snatch of the little tune without tempo, then cracked the lid of the trunk.

"Listen, you," she whispered. "Maybe I'm a clump for doing this, but I'm locking you in this trunk until after my act is finished. And then, if everything's clear, I'm taking you home with me. You understand?"

The "yes" that came from inside the trunk was somewhat muffled.

CHAPTER II

THE eyes of Regina, Naida's colored maid, widened and her mouth flew open. For the briefest instant she tried to recall what she had done to incur the wrath of her mistress. Certainly there was something wrong, otherwise what was this other colored wench doing with Naida—coming home with her like an ebony bodyguard. And then she was reassured; for Naida laughed, pinched her cheek and said:

"What! Even you are fooled, Regina? That's recommendation enough for my ability with grease paint and padding."

With the door once closed there came a transformation. The colored wench that had caused Regina some uneasiness abruptly became a figure in male attire; with the skin dye removed, a saw-toothed, narrow-featured denizen of the half-world. In the world of crime and criminals, Patsy Monteret was, and always had been, "in the know." He was one of that

magnetic breed that draws information of things that are doing, and things that have been done.

N AIDA had recognized him at first sight, when he stood cringing before her, pleading with his eyes. There was no sentiment attached to saving him from the cops. This was business. Naida was trafficking with the underworld—she was in the market for information, willing to pay a price. But, apparently, Patsy didn't realize she had already paid in saving him for the cops to pick up at a later date on this little stick-up matter.

She wouldn't bother telling him. Patsy, slouched deep in an upholstered chair, grinned and said: "Ain't cha got no liquor, girlie? Let's get some liquor an' have a little party."

Naida debated a moment, then agreed. "Might as well, I suppose," she said. She walked close to him, so close that she knew he was smelling the perfume of her body.

Anyone more clever than Patsy would have recognized the frigid notes of her laughter. But Patsy didn't. He just sat looking at her, his eyes like those of a man who has suddenly stepped from the darkness and into a brightly lighted room.

He placed a skinny, blue-veined hand upon the smooth white skin of her arm. "You're one sweet number, girlie. Don't bring too much liquor, because—well . . ." He broke off, grinning, then added: "We can't afford to get drunk, babe. Can we, now?"

Naida's eyes were hard, but Patsy couldn't see them. She bent over him, whispered in his ear, "Sweet boy!" And then she hurried into another room.

Ugh! What a miserable worm he was. Just another brand of fool, that's all. He was skinny, shifty-eyed, and the others were fat and pop-eyed. They were all fools, these men! Why, even The Brat had been a fool. Otherwise would he have gotten himself killed that way? But, regardless, she loved The Brat—more than most folks would believe.

N AIDA wasn't foolish enough to change from her street clothes into filmy negligee. She believed in mystery, and, even though Patsy had looked at her, there in the dressing room, she was again mysterious—alluring in the pale green dress that suggested rather than revealed.

After two drinks Patsy became rather inquisitive. His one arm, at first flung carelessly about Naida's shoulders, began to wander. Naida laughed and poured another drink.

"Patsy," she said, "you sort of like me, don't you—just a little bit?" Her tones were husky, yet strangely child-like, considering the simplicity of her words.

"Baby, you're immense. Y'know, I'd like to do something for you—something big."

"What, for instance?"

"Why, I—why, I dunno. Most anything, I guess. That is, if . . ."

"If what?"

"Aw, hell! You know what I mean. I could get to be simple over you, if you'd sorta team up with me."

"You mean marry you, Patsy?"

Patsy's face was a masterpiece of surprise. He said, "Hell, you ain't that kind of a broad—a marrying broad—are you?"

Naida laughed. "Why not?" And then she sobered abruptly. She said, "Patsy, suppose I agree to, as you say, 'sorta team up' with you, would you really do something big for me, something important?"

"Anything from snatching a purse to bumping off your best enemy—or worst friend," Patsy's reply came quickly, eagerly, and his arm went about her waist, so that his skinny fingers were upon the gentle curve of her breast.

"Would you tell me something I want to know?" She knew her breath was hot upon his sallow cheek.

"What?"

"Who killed The Brat?"

Patsy's skinny fingers fell away from her breast, and he swallowed hard. "The Brat? Why—why, I dunno—who killed him. How should I know that? What the hell! You're askin' me that?" He poured himself another drink, gulped it down, then said, "Why—what was he to you?"

"He was my brother—my kid brother, and I want to know who killed him."

"Why—so's you can tell the cops?"

Naida smiled crookedly and slowly shook her head.

Patsy was clearly puzzled. "Then what you want with the information?"

Naida snuggled closer, leaned against him, lips close—lips that were red and full and inviting. "I guess you don't think I'm so swell, after all—do you, Patsy? You do! But you can't. If you did, you'd trust me. You'd tell me what I want to know, and you wouldn't ask any questions."

"Aw, hell, babe—you don't understand. I can't tell you—I can't talk about such . . ."

Naida smothered the words in his throat,

pressing her moist red lips hard against his. She could feel his thin lips upon the whiteness of her teeth. She could feel the banging of his heart, the warmth of the breath rushing from his nostrils. And she took her lips away.

Her eyes, beneath half-lowered lids, were hard and brittle as Arctic ice. But Patsy didn't know. He thought they were dreamy, smoldering.

She said, "Patsy, you say you can't, when you mean you won't. Won't you tell me—please?" Again her lips were close to his, promising more this time.

"Sure, I'll tell you, babe—if you—if you'll . . ."

Naida kissed him lightly. "Silly boy. Of course I will. Who killed The Brat?"

PATSY'S answer was slow in coming. When he spoke, his tones were low, hardly audible. He said, "Manny Ruffin killed him—Manny Ruffin outa Detroit. He thought The Brat spilled his guts to the cops about a certain jug heist, so he bumped him. But The Brat didn't squawk—I know. And Manny's bad medicine, babe. I wouldn't have told anyone only you. He'd bump me sure as hell, if he knew—just like he did The Brat."

Naida was smiling now, and her smile wasn't good to see. Without a word she got up, filled a glass with liquor and handed it to Patsy. "So it was Manny Ruffin, eh? Big-shot. Manny from Detroit. The hard-guy play-boy who plays every girl who works at the Castle Club. Yeah, he plays them, and wants a cut in their winnings. So Manny Ruffin killed The Brat. Thanks, Patsy. Thanks for nothing—you lousy little rat! Now you can go. Get out. Get the hell out of here!"

But Patsy had different notions. What was this broad trying to pull? She had bought information—at a price—and she was going to pay. He told Naida that.

"Pay?" said Naida, clipping her words. "You fool! You believed that? Say, I paid for this information in advance, when I saved you from the coppers. Had you forgotten that, Patsy? Now get out!"

Patsy lunged at her, Naida stepped back, but not quick enough. His fingers gripped her dress, and he jerked his arm back. There was the sound of ripping cloth, and Naida was there before him, naked to the waist, her firm little breasts quivering as she fought back at him. And then the liquor bottle was in her hand. She raised it, then brought it down upon his head.

With a half-choked cry, Patsy reeled back—

ward, tripped and fell heavily to the floor. He lay still, breathing harshly.

Regina came into the room, her eyes white whirlpools in a dark ruffled sea. She saw the prone figure upon the floor, saw Naida half-naked, and hurried to her side.

"Mah pore chile," she said, offering supporting arms.

Naida laughed, pointed. "He's the only one that needs help, Regina—and he don't deserve it. So, you pack a couple of bags, get yourself dressed, and arrange to have my trunks shipped to the Castle Club in Detroit. I'll spend the rest of the night at a hotel, and when the cops come, let them have that carcass." She grimaced, and added: "They'll be glad to get it."

"Is we goin' places, Miss Naida?"

"And we're goin' to do things, Regina," she promised.

CHAPTER III

WORD of Naida's sensational *Danse de Afrique* spread over Detroit like oil over water. In fact, certain ones in Chicago heard of it, among them, Manny Ruffin. Manny wasn't in Chicago on business, exactly. He was there, cooling off. To be more precise, he was waiting for the Detroit cops to cool off sufficiently for his return. You see, a series of small jug heists had left the cops wondering about Manny—wondering how soon they'd get their paws on him—and how.

And then Manny came back. The cops didn't know it, but Naida did—and she didn't tell.

IT WAS the third night after her opening, and she knew Manny was seated at a small table there in the Castle Club, flanked by a couple of crime-scarred cronies. Good old Regina! It was she who brought the word, straight to the dressing room. Naida was making-up her eyes, and her slim fingers moved slower, more carefully. She was working with her lashes, and there was an odd twist to her lips, while she hummed that strange little tune.

Naida was waiting at the door. In a moment, now, she'd be out there driving the crowd mad with her dancing, with the twistings and quiverings of her splendid body, with the unexpectedness of her dance. Outside the door they were sliding their feet lazily to the slow dance music—those thrill-seeking couples who danced, seeking the warmth of the young bodies tight-pressed to theirs. The music stopped, was replaced by a hum of voices, a shrill laugh or two, and the master of ceremonies was announcing Naida.

There was a clash of cymbals, the mad swirl of wind instruments that rose to an infuriated crescendo, and burst with a thundering of drums. As though from afar, there came the slow measured throbbing of a tom-tom. . . . Naida opened the door and glided onto the dance floor.

SHE stepped over the rim of a ghastly spotlight, and there was a gasp of amazement from those at the tables. Good work, Naida! She was an old crone of Africa, a coarse straw skirt from waist to ankle, a dirty length of gray cloth from waist to shoulders, her face concealed by a mask, hideous with streaks of white and yellow paint. That was the way to make cities talk—give them the unexpected.

Naida tottered in a frantic attempt to dance the dance of youth—the passion dance of the African jungles. But the poor old muscles of the crone were stiffened by age, and the attempt was pitiful. She advanced upon the tables, seeking passionate words from men in whom she hoped to create the mad desire of love. But they laughed at her efforts and shoed her away. She approached the table of Manny Ruffin. He threw the contents of a highball glass into her poor old face. Beneath her mask the eyes of Naida glistened.

In the person of the old crone, she was portraying the death of love. The death of love—and he threw a highball at death. Naida laughed—a shrill, cracked, ominous laugh. She staggered, then slowly tottered back to the center of the dance floor.

The beat of the tom-tom increased, grew louder, more furious. There came another swirling crescendo of wind instruments that burst with the wave of darkness that swept the room. Dead silence. Blackness. A weak hysterical laugh.

THERE was a gradually increasing haze of light near the center of the dance floor. Manny Ruffin straightened in his chair, staring. All eyes were staring, all heartbeats had quickened: for there was Naida in the dazzling white spotlight—gorgeous Naida.

Her raven hair, interwoven with bits of bright yellow and red ribbon, was loose about her shoulders. Her body was a delicate glistening copper hue, and the peaks of her pointed breasts were rouged a vivid red. As she moved slowly into the first steps of her dance, several folds of bright blue satin trailed after her. Bracelets of gold and coral tinkled about her ankles and wrists. It was the portrayal of the birth and growth of love.

The first steps of the dance were groping steps that grew more purposeful, more determined. And then, suddenly, the vagrant spark of love kindled. With a defiant laugh, Naida bowed her slender body backward, shook her black hair from her shoulders, and stamped her dainty unshod feet hard upon the floor.

She drew nearer the tables, panting between the red, red lips—eager, arms outstretched, her hips moving slowly, slowly. . . .

Manny Ruffin was standing beside his table in a half-crouch, his face white, his lips trembling. God, what a girl! And she was coming closer—closer, so that he could see more of her, so that he might reach out and cool his fingers with the heat of her body.

Naida knew. She saw him standing there, and knew he was hers for less than the asking. And she wanted him—she was going to take him.

The new-born love of Africa was flaming hotly before Naida moved in an uncertain course to Manny's table. Her body was damp and smelled of exotic wild perfume. She was just beside Manny, now, and her eyes were pleading, her lips, her arms. Her red-tipped breasts quivered.

WITH a cry that matched the dance for wildness, Manny sprang forward, grabbed her in his arms. There before the crowd in the Castle Club, he held his hot lips to hers, and crushed her tighter to him. And Naida



"Oh, did he commit suicide?" she asked. The officer nodded. "He sure did when he pulled an empty gun on me."

The Messalina of Mexico

(Continued from page 41)

had once been our love-nest of orgy and debauchery.

"Emilita received me with eyebrows laughingly raised a stony expression.

"What is the meaning of this complete lack of manners and violation of my privacy?" she said furiously.

"I came here to find something out, and I want a straight answer right now!" I barked.

"Well," she said insolently, "what is it? Ask me."

"Are you deceiving me, or aren't you?"

"For one moment she looked at me incredulously—then threw back her tantalizing little dark head and emitted long peals of silvery, mocking laughter until the tears ran out of her eyes.

"You—!" I cried, goaded beyond endurance, "you harlot—vampire—Messalina." In that moment I saw red—knew that I had been duped by her first, last and always.

"I rushed for her throat—grabbed it with my two hands and started to choke her. She looked at me through half-shut lids, self-possessed in this moment as always, except during passion when she was wild and fiery. She made no attempt to wrench herself away. I could see now in this crucial instant, while even possibly in the act of being killed by me, that it was futile to attempt to make her react to me. I was nothing to her—could not affect her. The test of this supreme moment demonstrated Emilita's true colors—her palpable state of fatalistic, bored, fed-up attitude to me.

IN AN agony of brutality, I threw her to one side. She fell against the divan and lay there like some inert, relaxed forest creature, completely oblivious of my existence, but in this moment more than ever desirable. I fell upon her in a torrent of grief and sorrow—bitter frustration, impotent childishness.

"But you're mine, Emilita!" I reiterated pitifully. "Can you forget that I possessed you—and every maddening inch of your palpitating body? I know your every intoxicating curve—every little blemish and small beauty mark.

"She lay there, mocking, cynical and cool.

"You child. You *had* me? You big

fool of a lumbering imbecile! How I pity your naivete! I am the one that did the possessing. I *had* you—body and soul. I took you because your towering Anglo-Saxon masculinity appealed to me, seemed to indicate that you were a man—and could give me pleasure—and the things I want. But now I know that I was very much mistaken. You may look like a man, but to me you are a jelly fish—and I don't want you any longer. I'm through with you—tired—fed-up. Leave me. Go!"

"I covered her alluring, frozen body, precious soft flesh with feverish caresses—a storm of endearing names, apologies and pleas on my lips. I humbly begged her to wipe her feet on me—trample upon my feelings—allow me to be her adoring lap-dog, but only not to banish me from the life-giving effulgence and necessity of her presence. I frothed at the mouth in an agony of self-debasement. I pleaded that she take me back under any conditions however humiliating.

"She looked at me, her dark, torrid eyes a blank wall of complete distaste, and impassively replied:

"When you have quite completed your boring monologue, Damon," and pointed inexorably to the door.

"Tears of rage, body-wracking sobs were wrent from me, as I unashamedly grovelled at her feet.

"Go! she said again, pointing to the door, 'you worm-sodden mass of male amoeba.'

"Covering my eyes, I managed to wrench myself away in that moment, without a backward glance. In that second I knew what the adorners of Circe felt, just before she transformed them with one decisive wave of her hand, into swine. . . .

THE next few weeks were torment. Try as I would, I could not gain admittance to Emilita, for the house was boarded up, as it is when the inmates have gone to the country. Then, too, I lay in my hotel room alternately burning with fever, and shivering with ague. One day I received a letter on official stationery from the Mexican Diplomatic Corps asking me tactfully, but in no uncertain terms, to leave the country, due to certain undesirable activities of mine with international politics.

"I wasn't born yesterday, Val. I know that Emilita's important friend had been informed that I was a nuisance, and that some charges had been trumped up.

"A twenty-four-hour order to evacuate a

(Continued on page 93)

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